"Domestic and Respectable": Suburbanization and Social Control After the Great Chicago Fire

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Chicago's Great Fire of October 8-10, 1871, left 100,000 people homeless. At first, city authorities erected barracks for emergency shelter, but within a week they changed their tactics, "the barrack style of life proving unhealthy, both morally and physically" (Chamberlin 87). Chicago's elite philanthropists decided that barracks posed not only a physical threat of disease, but also a moral threat to economic industry, political stability, and sexual ethics: "So large a number, brought into promiscuous and involuntary association, would almost certainly engender disease and promote idleness, disorder, and vice" (87). Chicago's Relief and Aid Society was especially worried about "mechanics and the better class of laboring people, thrifty, domestic, and respectable," who had owned homes before the fire and for whom they believed only single-family houses could restore "hope, renewed energy and comparative prosperity" (Relief and Aid Society 8). What was at stake, according to the Relief and Aid Society, were the moral, civic, and economic values of Chicago's developing middle-class, and with these, the prosperity of the whole city.

So the Relief Society built single-family homes. Winter was approaching, lumber was scarce due to other forest fires that hot and windy autumn, the center of the city had just been destroyed by flames, one-third of Chicago's population was homeless, and Chicago's Relief Society chose to build suburban-style single-family homes.[1] Chicagoans had been burned out of apartments, boardinghouses, brothels, and hotels, but for the safety of their city, the Chicago Relief and Aid Society

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decided to re-house these people in suburban cottages. Over the exceptionally cold winter of 1871-1872, Chicago's Relief and Aid Society built 8,033 single-family homes on the outskirts of Chicago, while, downtown, businessmen erected a new commercial district (*New Chicago* 8). A few working-class immigrants protested this suburbanization, but most late nineteenth-century observers agreed that Chicago's fire had provided a lucky chance to build a better city.

Chicago's post-fire reconstruction provides a window on Americans' nineteenth-century ideas about housing, morality, and social control. Urban historians often analyze the effects of transportation technology on housing location, but in many American cities these technologies existed for years before suburbs became popular: technology does not determine its uses independent of questions of culture and power.[2] Streetcars, electricity, automobiles, trucking, asphalt technology, and roads systems helped suburbanize the U.S. more than Europe because suburbs supported Americans' late-Victorian ideas about gender identities and class formation. Chicago's Great Fire of 1871, like the flash from a camera, allows us to see many Chicagoans, all at once, discussing their built environment and the values they expected suburban-style houses to exert on their occupants.

Chicago's surrounding prairie had been crisscrossed by railroads since 1854, Chicago's model suburb of Riverside was begun in 1868, and "park speculators" had made fortunes buying and selling land in Chicago's outlying picturesque regions in the real estate boom of 1869. The Great Fire did not change this admiration for suburbia, but it did articulate and expedite it. After the fire, Chicago's suburbanization accelerated so much that boosters bragged, "Chicago, for its size, is more given to suburbs than any other city in the world" (*Our Suburbs* 3).[3] Visitors wrote: "The city stretches into suburbs, which themselves widen away and exhibit the outlines of new suburbs . . . . Chicago will be the City of the Twentieth Century" (Butterworth 113).

Looking at suburbs allows us to examine underlying relationships between the familiar binaries of city/country, work/home, and men's/women's spheres, but, perhaps because of this, defining the suburbs is far from simple. Nineteenth-century cities often annexed outlying districts, so suburbs were not necessarily politically separate from cities. Early suburbs grew up around older village centers (especially in the East, but affecting expectations in Chicago) and grew around the same time that many manufacturing industries also moved to metropolitan fringes, so suburbs were not necessarily distant from some places of employment. Paid employment existed inside many nineteenth-century homes, with servants, boardinghouse-keepers, and female producers of commodities like soap and honey, so suburbs were not necessarily spaces of consumption separated from production (Boydston 120-142). I will use suburb to mean an outlying district (Chicago realtors measured by distance from the courthouse in the center of what would become the Downtown Loop), containing single-family houses in neighborhoods of relatively low densities and relatively high social homogeneity. The Chicago Relief and Aid Society summed up most of these criteria in their term for what they wanted to build: "Isolated Houses" (9).

Recently, an urban planner declared: "There is no clear villain in the sprawl

scenario, except possibly the American dream" (Burwell 12). He was echoing more than a century of realtors, speculators, bankers, house builders, and house buyers who assume the American dream for an isolated house is ahistorical and value-neutral. Even historian John Stilgoe asserts that the American penchant for enclaves of single-family homes with private yards is "unchanging" (16) and "almost timeless" (308). But the suburban ideal has not always been the dream of most Americans. Especially before 1820, American villages mixed home and work as well as rich and poor in houses built close together, no matter how much land was available. The American suburban dream did not develop until the middle of the nineteenth century and did not gain wide popularity until the late nineteenth century. It is worth resituating the American dream into its historic context of Victorian gender and class formations, a context we can see clearly in Chicago in 1871.

"A Startling Story—Fiendish Work by Communist Incendiaries"

It had been exceptionally dry that year, with no rain since early July and daily fire alarms throughout early October. Admitting that the "proximate cause" of the fire could have been the dry weather, the exhausted fire department, the hurricane-like winds, and possibly the wrath of God, Chicagoans still sought to identify an immediate cause (Luzerne 91; Colbert and Chamberlin 196). Their theories about the origins of the fire exposed fears about Chicago in 1871 in the midst of late nineteenth-century urbanization, immigration, and industrialization. Chicago's population had doubled almost every five years since 1830, and by 1870 European-born immigrants made up more than two-thirds of the city's residents. Chicago was not only crowded with foreigners; it was also filling with factories on the awesome scale of the stockyards, which had opened in 1865. The Chicago River, pristine in 1840, had become undrinkable by 1860. Chicago had grown more rapidly than any other nineteenth-century American city, and Chicago could be frightening.

The fire story most widely circulated, then and now, is that an Irish immigrant named Catherine O'Leary was milking her cow in a barn on DeKoven Street at 9:30 p.m. when the cow kicked over a kerosene lamp and started the fire. The moral seems obvious: beware of poor foreign women who pursue rural careers in urban settings (Sawislak 43-44; Spinney 99; Cromie 24-30). But contemporaries drew a slightly different moral:

> If the woman who was milking the cow had not been late with her milking, the lamp would not have been needed. If she had plied the dugs of the animals with proper skill, the lamp would not have been kicked at all . . . . The blame of setting the fire rests on the woman who milked, or else on the man who allowed her to milk. (Colbert and Chamberlin 202)

This was a moral about engaging in punctual, careful, gender-appropriate behavior; it was a moral about adopting the strategies of the emerging middle class (Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*; Dixon). The *Chicago Times* emphasized this lesson by tweaking the story: in their version, Mrs. O'Leary grew angry when charity workers cut off her relief after discovering she owned a house and cow. "There are those

who insist the woman set the barn on fire," the *Times* alleged. "The old hag swore she would be revenged on a city that would deny her a bit of wood or a pound of bacon" ("The Fire" 1).

The *Workingman's Advocate* included a rebuttal from "Mrs. Leary" herself: "I never had a cint from the parish in all my life and the dirty *Times* had no business to print it" ("Origin of the Fire" 1). But even this union newspaper did not dispute the underlying accusation, that someone might cheat charity and destroy the city. The *Advocate* recorded Mrs. O'Leary's defense—she swore she always milked her cows responsibly on time, before dusk—but they also noted that "the woman would naturally shrink from the responsibility" of having caused the calamity (1).

Still, neighbors swore that the O'Leary family had been in bed an hour before the fire began. Some reported a suspicious man lurking near the barn when the fire started, and soon the *Chicago Times* printed "A Startling Story—Fiendish Work by Communist Incendiaries," in which a Parisian communard revealed his secret organization's "Diabolical Plot for the Destruction of the City" ("A Startling Story" 1; Luzerne 186-196). Frustrated after months of "fruitless attempts to stir up strife between the mechanics of the city and their employers," the communard claimed he had burned Chicago "to humble the men who had waxed rich at the expense of the poor" ("A Startling Story" 1). Other newspapers reprinted this story with doubt, "without the expression of any opinion as to its authenticity" (Luzerne 190), but they did print it, and one journalist added: "That many of our prominent citizens believe in the genuineness of these revolutions, is demonstrated in daily conversation; and it is by no means impossible that they are founded on truth" (196).

While French radicalism or Irish carelessness were blamed for starting the fire, other factors were criticized for intensifying it. Many people blamed the poor who built with wood too near to the brick and stone homes of the rich. Others blamed the corrupt fire commissioners, who were drunken immigrants according to some observers and exhausted heroes according to others. The picture that emerges is of a remarkably divided city, changing rapidly, frightening many. This was a world in which an angry old Irish woman or a fanatic Parisian communard could be believed to have destroyed an entire American city. In the words of a popular song of the time: "A cow could kick over Chicago" (qtd. in Smith 96).

Chicagoans felt unstable in 1871, torn by growing divisions of class and ethnicity, so they sought stability through suburbanization. The potential for strife between mechanics and their employers that was visible in the rumor about the communard, the dangers from insufficiently bourgeois immigrants like Mrs. O'Leary, the risks from placing wooden cottages too close to marble mansions: all these tensions might be alleviated, Chicago philanthropists hoped, by suburbanizing an emerging middle class.

"Barriers Burned Away"

The fire exacerbated the instability of nineteenth-century Chicago. "Bidding defiance to the very laws of nature" (*New Chicago* 4), Chicago's Great Fire destroyed marble buildings, warped metal railings, and lit the night of October 8, 1871, "as

light as day" (3). According to contemporary chroniclers, it was not only natural, scientific laws which the fire transgressed. Victorian-era norms of gender and class were impossible to maintain without the built environment. Nineteenth-century cities had been developing increasing spatial segregation between classes as well as gender-specific spaces, a segregation which the fire destroyed (Blumin 232, 275). Prostitutes filled the streets, according to many contemporary chroniclers of the fire; prostitutes were no longer contained by brothels or limited to vice districts. At the Washington Street tunnel under the Chicago River

> there rushed into the dark, cavern-like tunnel bankers and thieves, merchants and gamblers, artizans and loafers, clergymen and burglars, matrons and rag-pickers, maidens and prostitutes—representatives of virtue and vice, industry and improvidence, in every grade, and strangely commingling . . . . There were bruises and groans, blows and piercing shrieks, prayers, imprecations, pocket-picking, and indignities unmentionable. (Luzerne 78)

Matrons and ragpickers, clergymen and burglars, and other pairs mixed by class (but still segregated by gender in this account) all might meet in more ordinary times, under circumstances in which each knew their place. Part of the horror of the fire was of a crowd of people without places, a crowd where classes had become unrecognizable. One of the best-selling novels about the fire described "the awful democracy of the hour" in a book titled, simply, *Barriers Burned Away.*

Witnesses describe white people, begrimed by smoke, who appeared black (Colbert and Chamberlin 251). But accounts of the fire dwell most often on violations of class and gender norms. There were "north side nabobs, herding promiscuously with the humblest laborer . . . . Scores of men were dragging trunks frantically along the sidewalks, knocking down women and children" (Colbert and Chamberlin 230). While some men showed too much masculine aggression, others showed too little: "Men of iron were completely unmanned" (*New Chicago* 4). And women were shockingly unfeminine. The crowd fleeing the fire had

> features wildly distorted with terror, people unclad, half-clad, some wrapped in bed clothing, women dressed in the apparel of the opposite sex, and some protected only by their night-wrappers, carrying beds, babies, tables, tubs, carpets, crockery, cradles, almost every conceivable thing of household use . . . . [The] uproar redoubled with Babel sounds and Bedlam outcries. (Luzerne 67-68)

Women outdoors in their nightgowns were alarming enough to proper Victorians. But some of these women had found the strength to carry beds. And a few women, at least according to this account, had cross-dressed as men. Nineteenth-century men's clothing would have been quicker to put on, more practicable for walking long distances, and more protective for any woman wishing to avoid sexual harassment (those "indignities unmentionable") in the crowd fleeing the fire. Men's clothing was also less flammable than women's; newspapers in the decades after the Civil War contain thousands of stories of ladies burning alive in fashionably elaborate costumes which they were unable to remove (Luzerne 150).

More often than cross-dressing women, chroniclers of the fire reported other women, in shock, giving birth out-of-doors and alone to babies who quickly died of exposure. They disagreed on the number—somewhere between 150 and 500—but we do not need to believe their facts so much as marvel at their underlying alarm over women without shelter (Colbert and Chamberlin 357; Luzerne 101, 119; Higginson 56). Sudden homelessness would be traumatic to anyone, but it is particularly Victorian to read accounts of a man following his sister-in-law as she ran out of her unburnt house into the crowd fleeing the fire, repeatedly fainted, and lost her children and jewelry in the confusion, until he finally "hauled her, shrieking with hysterics, in a baker's wagon, some four miles, over much debris, to the home where she ought to have stayed in the first place" (Colbert and Chamberlin 245).

Only 300 people died in the fire, according to official reports, while 17,450 buildings burned. Chicago's Great Fire left prostitutes uncontained by brothels, poor people uncontained by tenements, a few women uncontained by clothes, and many people uncontained by houses. Crowds of fire refugees mixed by class, gender, and sometimes race were without the familiar status-markers of fashion and architecture: "That first night after the fire—that fearful Monday night of the 9th of October in Chicago—was as complete a picture of social, moral, and municipal chaos as the wildest imagination can conceive . . . . Men were like ships which had lost their anchors—adrift in mid-ocean, without chart, compass, or destination" (Taylor 256). Homes were the anchors that were lost: "Like thistle-down ten thousand homes went drifting through the air / And dumb Dismay walked hand in hand with frozen-eyed Despair" (256). Chroniclers of the fire grasped at multiple images of chaos: it was Babel, Bedlam, Sodom, Pompeii; it was, perhaps, the end of the world (King 39; Judd 69; Painter). To restore that world, Chicago's elites decided to build single-family suburban houses.

"There will be a very general demand for property in the numerous suburban villages that surround Chicago."

On the night of the fire, "away sped the crowd, afar off to the bleak prairie, to the lake shore, to parks, cemeteries, anywhere remote from combustible material" (Luzerne 70). The places that people went for safety were picturesque parks and suburban enclaves. While the fire was still smoldering, the *New York Times'* Chicago correspondent declared: "Numerous outlying blocks and many edifices of the better class in the more thinly-occupied [districts] have been spared" ("Devastated Chicago" 1). The fire, he implied, vindicated the wealthy who had chosen to live on larger lots further from the central city. The *Chicago Times* was explicit about this lesson: "There will be a very general demand for property in the numerous suburban villages that surround Chicago . . . . This demand will be the natural result of the recent fire, which has shown the danger of building frame dwellings too close together" ("Real Estate" 1). People turned to suburbs for safety.

This suburban impulse intertwined with an ideology of domesticity. One of the widely-circulated engravings after the fire showed the shop of realtor William D. Kerfoot, the first burnt-out business to reopen, in a shanty whose sign declared:

"All gone but wife & children & ENERGY!" (Luzerne 229). Energized by domesticity, Kerfoot encouraged others to be similarly energized and to buy homes from him. Another image showed a couple getting married in the ruins. These images encouraged the formation of nuclear families in isolated houses. These images were popular, presumably, to people eager to see that domesticity and realty would continue in Chicago.

Actual weddings immediately after the fire were not as glamorous as the one pictured in the engraving, but Chicagoans eagerly shared wedding news: "Essie Stockton was married the Thursday after the fire in a white petticoat with a morning dress looped over it and departed on her wedding trip with her 'trousseau' tied up in a pillowcase! Louise Goodwin and her devoted went off on theirs with passes furnished by the Relief Society!" (Higginson 54). This letter-writer was impressed that domestic ideals endured, yet also distressed that the trousseau was so meager and the fashionable wedding-trip subsidized by charity. She recognized that ideologies of gender and space also depend on class, and would not be as easy to restore as the popular engravings made it seem.

Others were so confident about rebuilding that they made jokes: "The editor of the New York *Commercial* says he read it just 47 times in 48 hours that 'Chicago will arise like a phoenix from the ashes'" ("Chicago Cinders" 1). Chicago could rise like a phoenix because most of Chicago's geographic resources had survived the fire:

> All is not lost. Though 400 million dollars' worth of property has been destroyed, Chicago still exists . . . . The great national resources are still in existence; the lake, with its navies, the spacious harbor, the vast empire of production, extending westward to the Pacific; the great outlet from the lakes to the ocean, the thirty-six lines of railways connecting the city with every part of the continent—these, the great arteries of trade and commerce, all remain unimpaired, undiminished, and all ready for immediate resumption . . . . We have lost money—but we have saved health, vigor, and industry. ("Rebuild the City" 2)

The conditions that had made Chicago a prairie metropolis, gateway to the West, still existed, and it served the interests of Eastern businessmen to help their Chicago debtors. In addition to networks of railways and canals, *Harper's Magazine* explained, "[t]he telegraph has made us all of one nerve . . . . While Chicago burns New York trembles" ("Editor's Easy Chair" 133). Philanthropy flowed to Chicago because of these commercial networks. Boston, Berlin, Cincinnati, Dublin, Milwaukee, New York, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and other cities together sent more than $7 million for Chicago's relief; relief funds that were organized, often, by businessmen in Chambers of Commerce (*New Chicago* 13).[4]

Some women reported that no amount of money could replace their domestic losses, especially the losses of sentimental objects that had helped them adjust to the dislocations of the nineteenth-century Midwest:

> We had a nice little cottage . . . with a little yard in front, where I had planted the rose tree mother gave me from our dear old home. Mother is dead now, and the homestead sold . . . . The honeysuckle over the door came from a far-away sister's

grave at the East. The mementoes on the mantel, the pictures of those gone before, the playthings of some little ones who are lying still and peaceful in Rose Hill, the golden locks cut from their curly heads, and the little clothing that they wore—where is it all? What a horrible dream! We didn't save anything. (qtd. in Luzerne 181)

Such sentimentality coupled with mortality is familiar to any reader of nineteenth-century women's writing. It is also often suburban. This woman missed her decorated cottage and picturesque yard; she missed the horticulture that suburban architect Andrew Jackson Downing had called "a labor of love offered up on the domestic altar" (Downing 79; Beecher 294). She lamented that she could not recover her nice little cottage—and the social relationships it signified—as easily as most of Chicago's men recovered their businesses.

But it is deceptive to think of women's domestic sphere as entirely separate from men's commercial sphere. The Chicago Relief and Aid Society designed relief cottages so that

a handy man [can] build in ten days a comfortable dwelling which thousands of Illinois pioneers forty years ago would have coveted. He will thus obtain a new home for his family; a home which he can call his own; a home which comfort, cheerfulness, and contentment can then make glad with blessings and from which he can go forth with a heart full of hope to battle against the world, to assist in rebuilding Chicago. ("The Fire" 5)

This home was a refuge, built by men, maintained by women, meant to energize men to go forth into the confusion of the nineteenth-century city. This vision omitted all unattached, single people, while it intertwined men's and women's spheres. This vision was a nostalgic one, with its reference to pioneers, written by someone who had already forgotten that most of Illinois's pioneers had lived in a fort until the 1830s. In the 1840s, according to early settlers as well as city directories, "half of [Chicagoans] boarded in the taverns and boardinghouses, and the other half were crowded into small dwellings in rooms over the stores" (Cleaver 49).[5] Some of the pioneers' sixteen-by-twenty foot wooden houses did outwardly resemble relief society cottages, but inwardly contained commercial uses, mixed classes, and unrelated residents. By 1871 many Chicagoans, with the rest of the U.S., believed in the false nostalgia of the cult of domesticity.

"As a rule, none but permanent paupers will stay in the barracks."

After the fire, a Citizens' Committee, appointed by politicians, began to distribute funds donated for fire sufferers, but "the relief was necessarily conducted without system, and relief was given to all who asked" (*New Chicago* 7). This was a problem, Chicago's elites worried, because "indiscriminate" charity might create a permanently dependent underclass. Chicago's mayor asked the elite philanthropists of Chicago's Relief and Aid Society to take charge of dispersing relief "scientifically." Scientific charity meant using a businesslike board of directors, including

George Pullman and Marshall Field; dividing the city into districts and the charity work into bureaus; and carefully examining each request for charity on forms which eventually cost $22,000 to print. Scientific charity meant "perform[ing] the double service of guarding against imposition and hunting out deserving cases who were too sensitive to apply in person" (*New Chicago* 7).[6] The paradoxes are fascinating: while discouraging anyone who asked for aid, the Relief and Aid Society also encouraged people who had not requested aid to take it. While trying to re-establish the domestic sphere, the Society paid women visitors to examine others' homes, implicitly presuming the public, political nature of domesticity.[7]

The Citizens' Committee had erected barracks, the *Chicago Tribune* had advised bringing in an army quartermaster to teach more barrack construction ("Committee on Shelter" 2), and the first general plan of the Relief and Aid Society had included a "Committee on Shelter, to provide tents and barracks" (6). But, a week after the fire, the gentlemen leaders of the Relief and Aid Society had a grander idea. They explained that "rude barracks" risked leaving Chicago with "a large class of permanent poor still without homes, and demoralized by a winter of dependence and evil communications," a class who would be "dangerous to themselves and the neighborhood in which they might be placed" (8). Although barracks were convenient, the Relief and Aid Society reserved barracks for "the class who have not hitherto lived in houses of their own, but in rooms in tenement houses" (10). This tenement-class of former renters was 5% of the fire sufferers, sheltered in four barracks, where, the philanthropists explained reassuringly, "under the constant supervision of medical and police superintendents, their moral and sanitary condition is unquestionably better than that which has heretofore obtained in that class" (10-11).

Another class, 40% of the sufferers, the Relief and Aid Society recognized as the "mechanics and the better class of laboring people, thrifty, domestic, and respectable, whose skill and labor are indispensable in rebuilding the city, and most of whom had accumulated enough to become the owners of their own homesteads" (8). For this middle group of former homeowners, the Relief and Aid Society decided to erect isolated, single-family houses in order to provide "incentives to industry [and] the conscious pride and independence of still living under their own roof-tree . . . to raise them at once from depression and anxiety, if not despair, to hope, renewed energy, and comparative prosperity" (8). They believed a domestic refuge in an isolated house would inspire the better class of laborers to help rebuild Chicago. Labor historian Karen Sawislak describes a two-tiered class system during the Great Chicago Fire, divided between laborers and employers (14). Blurring those two tiers, Chicago's Relief and Aid Society insisted on making homeowners out of the respectable laborers of the lower middle class.

In the Society's view, a few families needed barracks and supervision while many families merited houses and respect. The Society ignored people without family, especially elderly or single people, along with anybody in the middle or upper classes who chose to rent. By the Society's own statistics, they did not provide housing help to 55% of fire sufferers, who were either too immoral to merit charity or else too well-off to ever request "public bounty" (10).

"The committee on shelter is proceeding in a manner worthy of the highest commendation, and their plans contemplate a work which the whole community must applaud for its wisdom as well as for its Christian spirit," the *Chicago Times* enthused, and others agreed ("Houses for the Houseless" 2; Sawislak 95). The committee on shelter "illustrate[s] the intelligence, energy, business-like economy, and prompt dispatch" of the Relief and Aid Society (Colbert and Chamberlin 527). This was their business-like, moral plan: to any family who already owned its own lot, they gave one bed-frame, mattress, stove, table, cooking-pot, half-ton of coal, and all the lumber necessary to build a house, all for $125, a remarkable bargain, even in 1871. They gave this outright to widows, while they asked for payment from those they believed could afford to pay. They rejected about one-third of the housing applications they received, "of course," the *Chicago Times* explained, "as the vouchers of endorsement will not always hold water, and again many others are unable to furnish satisfactory proof of their being in any way worthy objects for help in this direction" ("Relief Report" 1).

The Relief and Aid Society provided lumber for two basic houses: a twelve-by-fifteen foot one-room house for families of three or less, and a sixteen-by-twenty two-room house for families of four or more. Such small quarters were not unusual for their time. The most basic design for a suburban cottage, by popular nineteenth-century architect Andrew Jackson Downing, was a two-room building, eighteen-by-twenty-six feet, with only a few closets and a larger overhanging roof to distinguish it from the plain plan of the Relief and Aid Society (Downing 72). As late as 1947, popular housing developer William Levitt built a similar, small cottage. The Relief and Aid Society cottage was stark, but it was not much different from the lowest level of suburbia in America for decades before and after 1871. The Society expected people to upgrade to larger, sturdier buildings anyway, and many cottages were eventually given additions and second stories (Abbott 74, 184, 186).

"The morals, the health, and the liberty of man"

The Relief and Aid Society had been worried about promiscuity in the barracks. Promiscuous, in the nineteenth century, meant crowded together indiscriminately ("Promiscuity"). Urban promiscuity posed a physical risk, as new ideas developed about the importance of healthy fresh air while new factories and technologies made living close to industry less appealing. But urban promiscuity also posed a moral risk, as urban people mingled without small-town systems of supervision and "girl on the town" became a euphemism for prostitute, replacing the earlier term, "suburban sinner" (Cohen 64; Jackson 147). City hotels, boardinghouses, and tenement apartments with lodgers came to be seen as "insidious, family-wrecking" spaces, as stated in a 1904 suburban advertisement (Stilgoe 241).[8] As Foucault has observed, Victorian sexual repression was also a sexual obsession, attributing an immense amount of attention and power to sexual desire (17-35). If busybodies could not tell who was entering a home, it was assumed, the members of that home would be tempted to commit adultery (Jackson 90; Deutsch 69). If non-related adults lived in close proximity, especially in lower-class homes, they might also be

tempted to commit adultery. Servants and visitors in upper-class homes were exempt from this reasoning, of course, because it did not serve any moralists' interests to prohibit servants or houseguests. Moralists worried about the one-fifth of urban families who took in boarders to supplement their incomes (Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream* 20), and the nine-tenths of Victorian-era New York City housing starts that were "Parisian flats," which we now call apartments (Ryan, *Civic Wars* 196).

Causality was confused between cleanliness and godliness, housing and morality. Among congestion, dirt, poverty, crime, intemperance, foreignness, vice, and political radicalism, who could tell which was the cause and which the effects? As early as the eighteenth century, Thomas Jefferson declared: "I view large cities as pestilential to the morals, the health, and the liberties of man" (qtd. in Jackson 68).[9] Cities, Jefferson believed, bred immorality, disease, and bad politics. By the Victorian era, popular magazines like *Harper's* agreed: "Myriads of inmates of the squalid, distressing tenement-houses, in which morality is as impossible as happiness, would not give them up, despite their horrors, for clean, orderly, wholesome habitats in the suburbs, could they be transported there and back free of charge" (qtd. in Jackson 117).[10] Tenements were so bad, apparently, that they left tenement residents unable to appreciate better environments. Environmental determinism was popular logic: just as some temperance reformers sought to eliminate drunkenness by eliminating saloons, many housing reformers sought to eliminate poverty and vice by eliminating urban housing. Reinhold Neibuhr later named this "the doctrine of salvation by bricks" (qtd. in Jacobs 147).

In order for homes to influence their occupants best, many nineteenth-century supporters of domesticity agreed with Henry C. Wright that "[t]he isolated home is the true home" (qtd. in Ryan, *Empire of the Mother* 97).[11] These "true" homes were isolated from each other only geographically, not politically. Women's historians are familiar with the irony: the supposedly private, feminine, domestic sphere was assumed to hold immense power over public morals for both sexes. Domesticity was the central topic of popular literature in the nineteenth century, as this supposedly private realm was the focus of public scrutiny and the agent of gender and class formation (Ryan, *Empire of the Mother*; Blackmar 87).

In addition to reinforcing sexual morality, single-family suburban-style houses were conducive to consumerism. Paul Groth has argued persuasively that urban residential hotels and apartments were a zone of opposition to middle-class mores, a place where people did not have to save money or accumulate goods (198, 223-224). Homeowners, in contrast, have long been perceived as responsible, thrifty people. While urban apartment-dwellers may spend money in saloons and theaters, suburban homeowners are seen as saving money for larger, more stable purchases of land, furniture, and home décor. There are many examples of this pervasive discourse, such as this statement from the New York *Morning Courier* in 1847: "An immense proportion of the present misery of the poor arises from the associated community—the practical *Fourierism* in which they are forced to live and which does more than any other cause to destroy those feelings of attachment and moral responsibility, which belong to the idea of the home" (qtd. in Blackmar 148).

The idea that suburbs fostered responsible, middle-class consumption led to a related hope that suburbs would create conservative citizens. In 1948 Levitt famously declared: "No man who owns his own house and lot can be a communist. He has too much to do" (qtd. in Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream* 8).[12] From the other end of the political spectrum, Friedrich Engels also theorized, in 1872, that owning a house could keep a worker from becoming a communist: "For our workers in the big cities freedom of movement is the first condition of their existence, and land ownership could only be a hindrance to them. Give them their own houses, chain them once again to the soil, and you break their power of resistance to the wage cutting of the factory owners" (18). In addition to being kept busy caring for their lawns, homeowners can be reluctant to go on strike and risk missing a mortgage payment, less able to vote with their feet by moving to jobs with better conditions, and less free to demand political change. This seemed self-evident to American thinkers across many decades. According to the Industrial Housing Associates' 1919 publication *Good Homes Make Contented Workers*, for example, "[a] wide diffusion of home ownership has long been recognized as fostering a stable and conservative habit" (qtd. in Hayden, *Domestic Revolution* 283).[13] Chicago's Relief and Aid Society was not as explicit as Engels or Levitt, but shared their assumptions.

Nineteenth-century communitarian societies often drew direct links between "isolated houses" and the "conventions of civilization" (Spurlock 54). Communitarians changed their built environment in order to change their culture. Yet this logic could work both ways, as Chicago's leaders sought suburban housing to stabilize Chicagoans' relations with the conventions of civilization.

"No barrocks. No Tenment Houses . . . . Leave a House for the Laborur."

A few months after the fire, the Chicago City Council met to strengthen Chicago's fire ordinance by prohibiting wooden building within city limits. *Chicago Times* journalists explained: "Those who had the welfare of the city really at heart . . . with justice asked of the city for some guarantee that if they erected $100,000 marble fronts some other person did not squat $500 tinder-boxes beside them" (*New Chicago* 24). The rich, for their safety, wanted Chicago's housing more segregated by class. The wooden housing of the poorer people, including all 8,033 Relief and Aid Society cottages, would have to move outside of Chicago's city limits.

On January 15, 1872, thousands of Germans and Irish marched to city hall to protest the proposed fire limits, carrying signs whose spelling the *Chicago Times* mocked: "No barrocks. No Tenment Houses. No Fire Limitz at the North Site. Leave a House for the Laborur" ("Hesing's Mob" 1).[14] The *Times* criticized "those who wish to erect hovels on the North side" ("The Fire-Bugs" 3), and the *Tribune* wrote alarmist headlines about the "COMMUNISM" (2) of "The North Side Incendiaries" (2). This was the first mass protest after the fire, and the English-language newspaper claimed the protesters were not respectable homeowners at all: they were drunken "scum of the community" ("COMMUNISM" 2) and "scalawags who invaded the sacred precincts of the City Hall" ("Monday Night Riot" 2).[15] There is fear under

this insulting rhetoric, fear of respectable property owners who were simply demanding what the relief society had been offering: simple homes of their own. After another two weeks, Chicago's council passed the fire limits with no provisions for any effective enforcement, in a compromise that left few people happy (Sawislak 158-162; Rosen 95-109). The people wanted simple, single-family houses, but they wanted these houses in the city, not in the suburbs.

We know about white flight, transportation technology, and government subsidies as linked causes of America's suburbanization, but we rarely hear this: it was cheaper to build outside city limits. Chicago's lower middle classes were pulled to the suburbs by relief cottages, but they were also pushed to the suburbs by municipal building codes, city taxes, and policies like Chicago's fire limits. We see this in advertisements for subdivisions, such as S. E. Gross's 1880s advertisement, which reads: "OUTSIDE FIRE LIMITS! You can Build Wooden Houses! NO CITY TAXES!" We see this, too, in a real estate journalist three years after the fire:

> The fire ordinance which followed the fire . . . drove beyond the limits named all persons who desired to build homes for themselves and who had not the means to put up a structure of brick or other fireproof material. Hence a brisk demand for building just outside the city limits . . . . Indeed, the feature of the Chicago market for the past two years has been the suburban trade, in which many fortunes have been made. (Chamberlin 204)

Other journalists complained the poor had not moved out far enough: "Let a block get well on fire towards the Stock Yards in some densely settled locality, in the face of [a Southwestern] gale, and all the apparatus of the fire department must prove futile. Nothing but acres of solid brick or stone buildings that are virtually fireproof can stop it" (Croffatt 57). Instead of medieval city walls, Chicagoans envisioned a modern wall of expensive brick and stone housing surrounding their city.

"Jerry-built frame cottages"

The fight over fire limits highlighted ethnic strife in the city, but it also pointed to the ambiguous position of frame buildings. Daniel Boorstin's classic paean to the American mobility made possible because of ingeniously flexible balloon-frame wooden construction, known as "Chicago construction" from the 1830s until the 1870s (148-152), was not shared by Chicago's elites, who often dismissed frame buildings as insubstantial shanties and "rickety . . . old fire-traps" ("The Ruined City" 1). Mrs. O'Leary's frame house was variously named a "solitary shanty," shack, or "small one-story tenement" ("Origin of the Fire" 1). It was, remarkably, still standing after Chicago's two-day-long fire had burned 17,450 other buildings. And it was, remarkably, similar to the style of buildings that the Relief and Aid Society helped 8,033 other families build after the fire. It had been a fire cause, when occupied by an irresponsible immigrant too close to downtown, but the Relief and Aid Society hoped that something like it would be a fire solution, creating responsible property owners at the edge of town.

The housing hierarchy, in post-fire Chicago, placed hovels, shanties (rickety

wooden buildings), rookeries (multi-unit wooden buildings), and tenements (any housing for the poor, but especially multi-family housing) all on the lowest rung. A single newspaper report could call the Relief and Aid Society's house plans a "tenement of one or two rooms," yet also a "cottage" and "an incalculably more comfortable abode for an intelligent human being" than the larger tenements of the barracks ("The Fire" 5). We do not usually consider one-family houses to be tenements, but Edith Abbott also identified post-fire frame buildings as one of the main causes of Chicago's tenement districts. "With all their good intentions, [the Relief Committee] had erected great numbers of 'jerry-built' frame cottages" (21), Abbott explained, so that one of Chicago's worst housing problems was "frame tenements [which] were built hastily after the Great Fire of 1871, and . . . still remain after the hard usage of more than half a century" (184). Abbott's study of Chicago's tenements reveals the eventual deterioration of Chicago's less-elite inner-ring suburbs, as multiple families and less-elite races crowded into houses designed for only one family. Yet, back in 1871, few people criticized Chicago's post-fire reconstruction.

"The grandest year's labor in the world's history."

"Chicago rose sublime from its ashes," most Chicagoans agreed (Maitland 21). Using a series of maps, historian Christine Rosen concluded that the fire "caused a permanent reorganization of residential, commercial, and industrial land use patterns that turned an old-fashioned walking city into a comparatively modern . . . metropolis in less than two years' time" (140-176). After the fire, Chicagoans separated areas that had held mixed uses, and Chicago set a model for modern American cities.

The fire let Chicago's business leaders replace downtown neighborhoods of poor immigrants with an expanded central commercial district. After describing the frame shanties, brothels, "jew clothiers," and cheap boardinghouses that had filled Fifth Avenue before the fire (renamed Wells Street in 1871, which later became the site of the Sears Tower), *Chicago Times* journalists observed this street had

> a reputation so odious that nothing less than our fire could have remedied it . . . .
> In fact Wells Street contained a class of buildings and population that Chicago could not feel sorry at the loss of. The property occupied in this objectionable way was valuable, being eligibly situated in respect to some of the most important thoroughfares in the business [district] . . . . The fire, with all its train of misfortunes, did not do so badly in solving this difficulty for Chicago. It swept away all the obnoxious features of the street, and forever. (*New Chicago* 31-32)

In the weeks after the fire, the Relief and Aid Society had provided free train passes to 30,000 people seeking to leave town, while forward-looking businessmen purchased centrally-located land at fire-depressed prices. Within a year, prices had risen above their pre-fire levels, and Chicago had laid the groundwork for a much larger central business district, while separating the homes of the poor from the retail business of the rich. This separation of rich and poor, business and residence, was valued by Victorians:

> Chicago property now stands better classified and its future more distinctly marked than could have been possible before the fire . . . . The different departments and grades of business are assigned . . . . Within the city, homes for the poor, quarters for the humble trades, districts for the chief manufacturing enterprises, retail streets of the various trades, boulevard regions and the meaner purlieus, are distinctly marked and foreshadowed. ("The Effect of the Fire" 261)

Earlier in the nineteenth century, workers had lived near their employers, industrialists had built mansions next to their factories, and business-owners had lived above their shops. Immediately after the fire, small factories, retailers, and professional offices mixed in whatever available buildings they could find, and sometimes located in residential parlors, a mixture that contemporaries labeled "whimsical" (Rosen 145). As the expanded downtown sorted out different commercial uses, and as the new fire limits segregated flammable factories from less-flammable retail, Chicagoans separated their businesses in a style most twentieth-century urban planners call "rational" (Rosen 159), but which planning reformer Jane Jacobs calls "unbalanced" (215).

This separation meant that the fire "hastened the removal" of many Chicagoans to the suburbs, so that prices of suburban real estate rose 10-50% during the year after the fire: "There has never been a season of greater land activity in the suburbs" (*New Chicago* 24). National observers agreed with Chicagoans that the fire had actually improved the city. "The prices of real estate are higher than at the time of the fire, and the industrial interests of Chicago have been more than re-established," *Harper's* explained. "In fact, the great disaster of last year is beginning to be regarded as a blessing in disguise" ("Editor's Historical Record" 149).

Decades after the fire, University of Chicago sociologist Ernest Burgess considered Chicago's central business district, with its rings of poorer and richer suburbs, and developed his radial theory of city growth, expecting other cities to behave like Chicago, expanding across open prairie, influenced by fears of fire and by ideologies of respectable housing. These theories were then nationally adopted in the policies of the Home Owners Loan Corporation and the Federal Housing Association, as well as the assumptions of many realtors and their customers. These theories, now known as "red lining," became self-fulfilling prophecies that helped create America's twentieth-century sprawling suburban landscape (Palen 15-17; Jackson 198). Chicago's sociologists helped the built environment created in Chicago in 1871 become the normative environment for America in the twentieth century.

"No monument has ever been erected to commemorate the event [of the fire] and really Chicago needs none but herself," the *New York Times* wrote on the ten-year anniversary of Chicago's Great Fire ("Chicago's Recovery" 7). If the Relief and Aid Society had given out only food and clothing, Chicago's journalists agreed, people would have sunk into "hopeless despondency" and become "helpless paupers" (Gay 171). Giving alms might hurt the alms-recipients, but giving "a cheap but comfortable house," on the other hand, "made them again independent citizens, giving them once more the proud sense of being property-holders, of having a share in the well-being of the community, bestowing upon them a renewed incen-

tive to good order, industry, and thrift" (172). Relief housing kept people from having to pay rent elsewhere, kept land values from varying too chaotically, and kept in Chicago "a permanent population which would otherwise have been scattered or have remained in penury, but which now may be relied upon to furnish mechanics and laborers for the future wants of the city" (172). The housing program cost one-third of the relief fund, but "the money could have been put to no wiser or more beneficent use, both in its material and moral influence" (172).

Notes

[1] For forest fires in Michigan and Wisconsin that year, see Colbert and Chamberlin 475-494.

[2] For streetcar technology preceding suburbanization, see Marsh 15. For links between technology and suburbanization which resist a technologically-deterministic simplification, see Warner; Jackson; Nye; McShane.

[3] Chamberlin writes: "The fact is thoroughly established that ninety-nine Chicago families in every hundred will go an hour's ride into the country . . . rather than live under or over another family, as the average New Yorker or Parisian does" (188). See also Chamberlin 339, 347ff.

[4] Karen Sawislak notes that on the same day a larger fire in Peshtigo, Wisconsin, left more people dead but garnered far less attention (21).

[5] For an examination of Chicago city directories from 1844 for statistics on boarding, see Groth 56.

[6] Donald Miller explains: "At times, the society seemed as interested in maintaining public order as in alleviating suffering" (162).

[7] See Sawislak 5, 60, 82-106, 264-280; Smith 64-77; Spinney 105-106. An interesting rejected housing application is reprinted on the Chicago Historical Society's website *The Great Chicago Fire and the Web of Memory*.

[8] See also Wolfe; Beveridge 164-166; Spurlock 25, 81, 150; Hayden, *Domestic Revolution* 38, 102.

[9] For a plethora of elite pronouncements about urban immorality, see Lees. For more diverse views about urban dangers and urban economies, see Cohen 10, 100, 355. For the best analysis of the double-edged impression of Chicago as both terrifying and awesome, see Cronon 350-369.

[10] For the moral influence of single-family homes, see Beecher; Sedgwick.

[11] Even when purportedly discussing neighborhoods, proponents of nineteenth-century domesticity described only isolated homes (see, for example, Beecher).

[12] See also Groth 254; Wright 125.

[13] See also Sawislak 64.

[14] For a more detailed account of this protest, see Sawislak 121-162.

[15] A *Chicago Tribune* article about North-siders who favored the fire limits was headlined, wonderfully, "They Are Not All Idiots" (1). The *Tribune* conceded that "there were quite a number of respectable Germans and Irishmen among the crowd—men who really do own lots," although the majority did not own property and were, therefore, not respectable according to this paper ("COMMUNISM" 2).

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