In Search of Woman's Place: An Historical Survey of Gender and Space in Nineteenth-Century Australia

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This paper offers a brief overview of questions of space and place in nineteenth-century Australia, with a particular focus on the gendering of public and private spaces and the ideological significance of the 'home' in defining women's status and social position. It argues that the social structuring of domestic spaces, and the patterning of power and usage within them, must be taken into account when interpreting their material reality and significance. It suggests that the gendered meanings of domestic and public space in Australia owed much to social ideologies about women's place in society. The home gained rhetorical significance through its deployment in public campaigns to improve women's status, and at the same time the 'battle of the sexes' was played out within the material confines of the home itself.

In October 1879, Thomas Anne Ward Cole sat down in her comfortably appointed Brighton home to vent her irritation in her diary. Her laundress, to whom she had previously given notice, had been reluctant to stay until her 'time was up', and the domestic environment had consequently been disrupted by confrontation.

> Mary Ryan the Laundress stood in the Hall and said she was going. I said your time is not up till tomorrow. She was not at all civil so I asked her who she expected to do her work. She said it was done. I said not so you have to wash the Hall and do out the drawing room next day and I am not going to let you go in this way. She said she could get her wages sent to her. I said no; I could give you a cheque for the money now if I chose but I give you no permission to go until tomorrow as I told you. She then said she would wash the Hall then. I said no; I should not have the Hall wet at that time of the day and she must do it in the morning. I said it was not right she should throw her work on the other servants so she went away in no good humour.[1]

The ill humour of mistress and servant was provoked by conflict on many levels. Mrs Cole felt her authority was under threat; Mary Ryan presumably felt that having been fired she was no longer compelled to display her usual deference. Mrs Cole wanted her servant to work according to her usual timetable until the moment of her departure; Mary Ryan, faced with unemployment, wanted to organise the time of her departure to suit her own needs. Mary Ryan wanted the pay that was owed to her; Mrs Cole sought to withhold it as a means of maintaining her authority as employer to the last moment. The immediate issue, however, which stirred the continued conflict, was over domestic space. To Mary Ryan, the house was a workplace, to be viewed in terms of chores to be completed. Within this perception, it was entirely practical for her to choose to work late in order to complete her allotted tasks of washing the hall and doing out the drawing room. To Thomas Anne Cole, however, the house was a home. To her it seemed entirely out of the question that the floor of the hall should be wet in the evening, or that the drawing room should be invaded by a servant at such an hour. Mrs Cole required domestic labour of her servants, but that labour was to be performed within certain prescribed hours, so that at other times her domestic space could be comfortable, clean, protected and private.

The incident is highly suggestive of the social structuring of domestic spaces. The function and perception of rooms was dictated as much by the patterning of power and usage within them as it was by the walls, floor and furnishings. The interpretation of physical spaces in archaeology promotes questioning about the social construction of those spaces, the way their meanings were inflected in class and gender terms. This paper offers a brief overview of the question of space in nineteenth-century Australia, with particular focus on the gendering of public and private spaces, and their meanings for white middle- and working-class women. It argues that there was a direct social link between the negotiation of gendered spaces, and the ideological formulation of 'woman's place'.

Nineteenth-century discussions of woman's 'place' in society tended to conflate physical space and social place as though there were no difference between the two. The truism that 'women's place was in the home' served to delineate and contain women's movement across physical spaces, and at the same time operated as an effective measure of women's status and respectability. A woman belonged within respectable society to the extent that she was seen to be attached to the home and the family. Her home not only provided respectability but also determined to a great extent her place in the social hierarchy, since this was closely linked to the appearance and organisation of the home.

The importance of both physical setting and social status to women cannot be emphasised too strongly. In broad terms, men throughout the nineteenth century tended to be judged on the basis of their actions, while women were judged, and assessed themselves, on the basis of their setting, their sense of place. This difference between the sexes was linked to the dichotomy drawn within liberal ideology between the public and the private spheres, and the assumption, in Carole Pateman's words, that 'women's natures are such that they are properly subject to men and their proper place is in the private, domestic sphere.' But women's greater attachment to a sense of place was also related to their sense of vulnerability within the public world, and the limitation on the ways in which they could claim identity and status. Lacking power in the public world, they sought influence and validation in the private sphere. Excluded from central social relationships and from a national mythology which emphasised masculinity, they sought status and social approval by not merely conforming to but actively constituting a circumscribed form of femininity. Lacking a culturally sanctioned sense of identity, they sought instead a strong sense of 'place', of belonging.

The respectability of the private sphere also offered more tangible protection from the hazards of the public world of men. Being 'in the home' kept women 'off the streets'. Numerous writers have drawn attention to the way the streets in nineteenth century cities were viewed as a moral as well as a physical hazard. The language of morality continually emphasised the metaphor of the streets as a 'source of moral decay'.[2] The streets became a metaphor for the broad rhetorical division of women into two categories, respectable and depraved. A prostitute, in the euphemisms of the nineteenth century, was 'on the streets', a 'fallen' woman, a 'lost' woman, an 'outcast'. The language in which she was described placed her explicitly outside society by placing her outside the home, depriving her not only of respectability but of her sense of place. While the language was generally used specifically in relation to poor working-class women, particucularly prostitutes, it helped to promote the streets as a place of danger for all women. Although, inevitably, respectable women did move through public spaces, they usually did so as quickly as possible, and were grateful for the protection of a carriage or the escort of a gentleman. When cycling became popular for ladies in the 1890s, one of the bases for criticism of the sport was that it caused women to become a part of the life and movement of the street.[3] The metaphor of danger was well entrenched, and to linger on the streets continued to be viewed as 'an inherently dangerous practice which threatened social order'.[4]

A lost woman by definition was deprived of the only recognised refuge for women, the family home. In the absence of this, attempts were made by social reformers and philanthropists to provide a substitute which offered the semblance of protection from the immoral world of the streets. The only means of redemption offered to prostitutes and vagrants was through training in domestic work, usually in a 'Refuge', in the hope that she would be able to find a 'place' or a 'situation' as a domestic servant.[5] There were several ironies within this language of place and respectability. A 'place' as a domestic servant did not simply offer a sense of security but defined a woman's place in the social hierarchy—at the same time depriving her of any autonomy which she might have experienced on the streets. Having *found* a place the servant was expected to '*know* her place', and if she did not conform to the prescriptions and expectations attached to her position she was vulnerable to 'losing her place'. The faith in domestic service as a means of redemption also ignored the fact that often a woman's 'fall' took place when she was in domestic service, isolated from the protection of her own family, and vulnerable to sexual exploitation by male servants or members of the household.[6] The hazards of the domestic home as a workplace for women were rarely confronted, although the image of the home as a haven for women, in which they were protected from the violence and sexual immorality of the world, was frequently contradicted by women's own experience.

The dichotomy between the public and private worlds represented particular problems in nineteenth-century Australia. In Britain and Ireland the process of industrialisation saw the home increasingly limited in its functions, and women becoming increasingly subject to domestic ideology, while men experienced the expansion of the public sphere.[7] In Australia the relationship developed differently. The colonies were born public, and a private sphere had to be carefully constructed, with the additional problem that it was constructed within a population in which the majority of women at first had been transported from Britain and Ireland, already defined as outcast and brought under the public scrutiny of the state. As the nineteenth century progressed, the penal system increasingly reflected developing domestic ideologies as well as new ideas about punishment, with convict women being assigned as domestic servants or excluded from society altogether by being incarcerated in the Female Factories. This shift paralleled the increasing containment of 'free' women within the constraints of a developing domestic ideology and an emphasis on the home and family life.

From the beginning the convict women had represented particular problems of control. The first arrivals were constantly criticised for being entirely brazen about their criminality and their sexuality, seeming to know no shame. Attempts to 'reform' them by converting them into deferential domestic servants were thwarted by the convict women's adoption of an intransigent attitude, their refusal to acknowledge a low and demeaning place in the social hierarchy and their avowed preference for an outcast status. Convict women preferred the Female Factory to domestic service. It provided them with some elements of female solidarity, and in that context they continued to resist discipline or moral restraint. In spite of the punitive environment, the discipline, rules and architecture of the prison, they maintained a 'rough culture' which shocked outside observers.[8] Their sexuality remained a destabilising, uncontrolled force within society. Their public presence was a 'visible symbol of social disorder', one of the arguments for the discontinuation of the penal system recommended by a select committee to the House of Commons in Britain in 1838.[9] The threatening image of the unashamedly sexual woman continued to haunt the public sphere of the streets throughout the nineteenth century.

Such challenges to the bases of domestic ideology were increasingly at odds with other developing social relationships within the colonies. From the beginning middle-class women were active in promoting the domestic sphere both for themselves and as a basis for moral reform. Their motives were a mixture of a genuine belief in the reforming power of the home, a belief that their own social influence would be greatest if wielded from the security of the home and the private sphere, and a perceived need to employ any possible means to convert a highly unwieldy labour force, as represented by the female convicts, into a disciplined and deferential domestic service.

At the same time as they were promoting domestic ideology as a means of civilising and reforming an undisciplined female population, middle-class women were experiencing and contributing to a process whereby their own homes were becoming increasingly complex and demanding. At first, the construction of genteel homes as status symbols was carried out largely by men. In the public world of the early days of the colony, status and wealth were adequately represented by buildings and opulent furnishings, usually purchased from Europe by wealthy male pastoralists.[10] Female social rituals existed, but were valued more as a symbol of British civilisation retained in the wilderness than for their contribution to colonial society. But as white society grew and became more complex, the interior lifestyle also increased in significance. Women's elaborate social rituals of calls and tea drinkings began to delineate good society, their taste in dress and in decorating their homes combined with their husband's wealth to establish the status of the family, and their reproductive role gained significance as they bore and reared the children who were to reap the benefits of newfound wealth and consequence.

Women's domestic work also took on a particular significance in the context of rural settlement and expansion. As squatters' wives, and later in the century as the sisters of gold diggers or the wives and daughters of selectors, they built homes and an air of permanence in the wilderness, lighting the 'candles of civilisation' wherever they went. The geraniums at the doorstep of the selector's hut, the billies and frying pans, sanded and scrubbed like silver and ranged on the wall of the miner's tent, were poignant testimony to the devotion with which women carried out the mammoth task. But such symbols obscure the sheer hard work which was really involved for most women. Literature by women writers such as Barbara Baynton or Miles Franklin offers a less romantic vision of the thankless, backbreaking, isolated work of the pioneer woman.[11]

The domestic work of pioneering women had another important function. In creating 'civilised' homes they were complicit in the process of claiming possession of the land. Domestic life and reproduction thus had significance in the wider context of race relations. The expansion of empire was thought to be morally justifiable because it brought 'civilisation' in its train. Houses were important emblems of white civilisation and white attitudes to property. Conversely, Aboriginal women were seen as 'outcast', unless they could be reclaimed and reformed through training in domestic living and domestic service. Attempts at 'reform' through such measures merely emphasised the clash of different cultures while imposing new forms of restraint upon Aboriginal women.

From the 1850s on, in the context of the increased prosperity brought by gold, the domestic scene within the urban environment took on new social and political significance. The home as a symbol of status and the setting for women's social identification was particularly important in the second half of the century, for both genteel and poorer women. It also became an important site of social relations, particularly of relations between the sexes and increasingly complex relationships of class. In these the use and allocation of space in the house was of crucial importance, and spaces took on new meanings according to their use.

For the gentry, the house was increasingly significant not just as a visible, physical symbol of status and prosperity to the outside world, but as a place of social display: an area in which invited guests could admire the accomplishments of young ladies, the skills of domestic management of older ladies, and the social skills of both. The complex social world of the late nineteenth century emphasised private parties and an elaborate, ritualised web of calls, networks and invitations. The genteel lifestyle was said to be open to observation at almost any time, and this fiction was maintained in the face of direct evidence to the contrary. Ladies developed their own social rituals to disguise each other's poverty and shortcomings if necessary. Before calling on a friend whom she knew to have no servant, Annie Dawbin, an ex-squatter's wife living in Melbourne, 'took the precaution to write and tell her we were going, as I know they . . . may not be always ready to receive visitors'.[12] 'At Home' days were a useful protection, even for more wealthy women, against being caught unprepared, although unexpected callers remained a hazard. Callers who interrupted busy housekeeping days, and were not tactful enough to take their leave at once, inspired testy comments by lady diarists. When two young women visited Thomas Anne Cole to talk about the prospects of opening a school for young ladies in the area, she had little attention for their ideas. 'They have no tact, whatever other qualifications they may have', she wrote in exasperation, 'for they sat talking until my patience was quite exhausted although they saw work going on'.[13]

The genteel lifestyle was, in fact, usually carefully constructed to make it fit for the public gaze, and at parties and dinners the presentation of domestic life offered was usually achieved at the cost of major disruption to the family's usual routines. On such occasions, the whole house, even bedrooms, could be converted into public space and made available to guests, sons moving out onto the verandah and parents moving in with daughters so that refreshments could be served in the bedrooms. Domestic comfort could be wholly overturned, with the family picnicking in the hall while the dining room carpet was rolled up and its floor waxed to make a good dancing surface. The home very often could not be a haven of privacy from the public world, but became itself a public space.[14]

By the 1870s and 1880s parties were less likely to cause major disruption to the homes of the wealthy, which increasingly contained a ballroom and other entertainment space where elaborate displays could be made without impinging on the domestic routines of the family. But the privacy of genteel families continued to be limited in other ways. Servants, important to the gentry as a part of their display of wealth and consequence and for their labour in maintaining the appearance of increasingly complex and elaborate homes, were themselves sometimes seen as intruders upon and unwanted observers of the family lifestyle. Their presence in genteel households continued and increased, creating specific problems of negotiation across class barriers within confined physical spaces.

Homes were notionally divided into working spaces which were chiefly the domain of the servants, and living spaces which were more sacred to the family, but as Thomas Anne Cole's confrontation with Mary Ryan clearly demonstrates, that division could not be always maintained, even in the largest of houses. In the course of their daily work, servants would enter the drawing room or their employers' bedrooms, cleaning, polishing, making beds. In the representation of their mistresses, this work, necessary as it was, could constitute an invasion of privacy, and careful negotiation took place to establish the times at which these domestic spaces were made available for cleaning. Mistresses also feared to find that their most treasured and fragile possessions had been misused or broken. Such events created a domestic crisis of enquiry and confrontation, and generally ended with the dismissal of the unfortunate servant.

The loss of privacy suffered by servants within this domestic context was of course far more marked. Servants' quarters were not safe from intrusion. The mistress of the household would come to the kitchen with orders each day, and although at other times the kitchen might be relatively free from surveillance, any dispute or uncharacteristic noise would be investigated, while servants caught drinking or quarrelling suffered from the wrath of their employers.

With the clash of classes in such a confined space came the clash of values and expectations. Mistresses found themselves unwillingly embroiled in servants' quarrels, if only as arbiters, and had to learn to live, in a world where ideal servants were hard to come by, with cooks who drank, laundresses with hasty tempers, and housemaids with shady pasts. They also encountered the Australian egalitarian spirit, and though they recoiled from it in horror, they were obliged at times to accommodate it. Colonial servants were renowned for *not* 'knowing their place', and anecdotes of great impertinence abounded: ranging from tales of housemaids who declared that they would give a new mistress 'a trial', or enquired closely at the interview about their living conditions and allowances, to the story of the general servant who laid a place for herself at the family lunch table. Such incidents seem trivial, but the assertion of authority and distance was of crucial importance for genteel ladies who spent a great part of their 'private' domestic lives in the company of members of the working class and had a quite genuine horror of losing their own standards and values by the contamination of such contact. Written records provide more testimony to the sufferings of the mistresses than of the servants in such cases, but it is fair to assume that the maintenance of distance and assertion of continual authority and surveillance was a far greater imposition on the privacy of the domestic servant, who would often also have suffered greatly from isolation, especially in the many houses where only one general servant was kept.[15]

The negotiation of space in working-class households was different and, given the cramped living conditions most experienced, more difficult. The display of respectability in a working class home could be very significant, and not only for the wife's sense of place. Janet McCalman has argued that the 'culture of respectability' was not simply a manifestation of bourgeois social control but had particular meaning for the working class both in their pursuit of dignity and prosperity and in their radical political life.[16] Even the less respectable working class could be forced to give consideration to appearances. Those poor enough to be forced to seek the negligible aid available from the philanthropic organisations of

urban society were subject to surveillance, and judgements as to their 'deservingness' or otherwise were made almost entirely on the basis of the neatness, cleanliness and respectability of person and of house. The homes of the poor, like those of the rich, were as often public as private: public in the dual sense of being a display of status, and open to invasion by unwelcome visitors. The most frequent visitors, apart from clergy, were bourgeois women who made no attempt to apply their own standards of privacy and decency to their dealings with women from such a different background, but would peer into the domestic arrangements, and make impertinent enquiries about money and personal habits. Working-class women did not always bear such impertinence in humility and silence. The question: 'Does your husband drink?' could earn the obvious retort: 'No, does yours?'[17] But such assertions of the right to equal consideration had little power against the force of a class system which held the poor to be entirely responsible for their own fate, and compelled them to be submissively grateful for the meagre bounties so highhandedly bestowed.

Although women's relationship to domestic space was significantly mediated by their class position, the common experience for the majority of women in the nineteenth century was that their private, as well as their public space, was controlled by men. Women might lay claim to domestic space during the day, and assert that claim by their activities in cleaning, ordering and decorating their homes, but when husbands, fathers, even brothers were present they surrendered their control. In the presence of men the relationships of power were clearer, and it was apparent that the activities of cleaning and ordering were not carried out for the women's own benefit, but as a part of the duty of maintaining the home as a male haven. This division of power was not entirely uncontested. Seemingly trivial disputes about whether or not he should smoke in the parlour could reflect tensions about the control and use of space, as her daily work of cleaning the house and maintaining its appearance of respectability (of which clean lace curtains, free from the yellowing effects of tobacco smoke, could be one of the most visible signs) came into conflict with his claims to the home as a site of recreation and relaxation. In many families patriarchal authority was not limited to the issue of domestic service. Temperance crusaders, moral reformers, fiction writers and working-class women themselves in depositions at legal hearings testified that the domestic haven could become a hell for some women.[18] Drunken or abusive husbands could engage in physical or sexual violence, and wives had few options when the refuge of the private domestic world proved illusory.

The importance of the home and domestic space for women was not confined to their unrecorded private experience. Not only was the house constantly on public display and subject to negotiations across the barriers of class and gender, but women's domestic experience also underlay, and became an important rhetorical device in, late nineteenth-century feminism. On the one hand, feminism represented a concerted effort to challenge the confinement of women to the powerlessness of the domestic sphere, and of 'woman's place'. On the other, the domestic sphere was central to many feminist campaigns, as women sought both to elevate its importance and alleviate some of its discomforts. In her feminist newspaper *The Dawn*, Louisa Lawson looked forward to the day when women would, 'with ready hands and new brooms', give Parliament its first 'spring cleaning'.[19] Much was made of the usefulness of women's domestic responsibilities as a training ground for moral decision making in a more public venue, and of the importance of women having some say in decisions which would affect those responsibilities. Issues such as divorce and custody laws, and guardianship of infants, clearly related to women's ability to carry out the domestic duties they took so seriously, rather than representing any resistance to the imposition of those duties.

Another primary motivation in feminist campaigns around the turn of the century related to women's control and autonomy within their own homes, and represented a recognition of the need to control male power and, more explicitly, male sexuality through broad legislation, since in individual homes the power lay overwhelmingly with the men. Marilyn Lake has argued that the 'battle of the sexes' was strongly in evidence in women's support for moral reform and temperance campaigns in the late nineteenth century. Women experienced poverty, desertion and cruelty as a result of male drinking habits, and their constant childbearing, and sufferings from sexual abuse and venereal disease, were associated with unrestrained male sexuality and the sexual double standard. Feminist campaigns carried a significant emphasis on moral reform because they constituted a response to the sufferings of women in individual homes, powerless to exert their wills against husbands wielding physical and financial power. The reforms sought by those who campaigned tirelessly for women's suffrage included measures to control and contain male sexuality and male drinking habits, secure more independent choice in marriage through economic independence and promote companionate marriage and 'voluntary motherhood'.[20]

Late nineteenth-century feminism was in many ways a response to the increasing sophistication and accompanying constraints of the domestic sphere. But at the same time it acted largely to reinforce the complexity and the constraints. Firmly linked with moral and social reform movements of the period, dominated by the Women's Christian Temperance Union, feminists threw themselves not only behind attempts to reform the marriage laws and get women into parliament, but also behind campaigns to get barmaids out of pubs, prostitutes off the streets, and women out of factories. The preservation of middle-class home life and the control of male sexuality manifested itself often in prescriptive legislation which in its immediate effects hit hardest at working-class women.[21] It also preserved and reinforced the moral imperative of contemporary understandings of 'women's place'. That place was still in the home, and the woman 'on the streets' represented as significant a threat to feminist campaigners for the reform of marriage as she did to more conventional moralists.

A brief survey such as this cannot hope to present the full complexity of the gendered meanings of domestic and public space in nineteenth-century Australia. I have tried to suggest that those meanings owed much to the development of social ideologies about women's place in society, and to point to ways in which contestations over female status and identity were played out in the context of the home. An investigation of the material culture of the home should endeavour to incorporate some understanding not only of how spaces were organised, but also of how they were negotiated and perceived within historically specific social contexts.

NOTES

1. cited in Russell 1994b:174.
2. Finch 1990:10.
3. Russell 1994a:33.
4. Finch 1990:10.
5. Davies 1989.
6. Swain 1980:98. There was a further irony in the fact that if a domestic servant was dismissed she lost her new home, and the meagre protection that it offered, as well as her livelihood.
7. It should be noted, however, that British feminist historiography is characterised by continued disagreement over the validity of this formulation. For a recent and provocative contribution to this debate, see Vickery 1993.

8. Daniels 1993:137. See also Summers 1975:ch 8, and Daniels and Murnane 1980:18-23.

9. Grimshaw *et al.* 1994:77.

10. Dyster 1989.

11. Baynton 1902; Miles Franklin 'A Common Case', cited in Daniels and Murnane 1980:118-9; see also Franklin 1936:chs 2-9.

12. Dawbin, Diary, 3 December 1864.

13. Cole, Diary, 11 November 1867.

14. Russell 1994b:74-5.

15. The above discussion draws upon Russell 1994b:ch 5.

16. McCalman 1982:90.

17. *Tocsin* 18 August 1898:4.

18. Saunders 1984.

19. For discussion of late nineteenth-century feminism in Australia, see Allen 1979; Johnson 1988; Reekie 1981.

20. Lake 1986.

21 For elaboration of this debate, see McConville 1987; Allen 1979.

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