

Employment of Women, Suburbanization And House Styles

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This paper suggests that modifications in house design occurring with suburbanization are among the structural conditions which accompany the employment of women. Shifts in design arising out of the expression of values through housing choices have produced differences in the "user-efficiency" of houses. To consider the hypothesis that house styles differing in exterior appearance and interior organization distinguish among life styles varying in location and employment status of the wife, 8 visible features were rated. Discriminant analysis performed on a probability sample (N = 102) distinguished first between features of suburban and traditional locations ($R = .54, p \leq .0001$) and second, between houses of employed and nonemployed wives ($R = .40, p \leq .02$).

Suburbs have endured the barrage of criticism primarily aimed at excessive conformity and exaggerated images of domesticity in the 1950's and 1960's (Donaldson, 1969) and continue to flourish, being chosen for aesthetics, social qualities and homogeneity of class (Michelson, 1977). The suburbanization of the countryside turned the dream of a house of one's own into a reality for millions of American families.

The growth of the suburbs, if mentioned in respect to women's employment, could be considered to be an opposing force functioning to keep women in the home. Women are leaving the

home in unprecedented proportions and at all stages of the family life cycle to go to work. Ericksen (1977), in a study of time and distance to work, reported that suburban residence has actually resulted in less time spent by women in the journey to work than for women living closer to downtown centers despite the shorter distances travelled.

It is commonplace to note that structural changes such as educational opportunities for women and control over fertility have accompanied the increased employment of women (Mandle, 1979). The impact of suburbanization on women's employment status is, however, unclear.

When asked why women seek employment outside of the home, most people (men and women, employed and nonemployed) agree that women work for the "money." Another frequent answer is "to get out of the home" (Duncan and Duncan, 1978). The house itself could thus be an

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indirect cause for women seeking employment. The costs of the homes of employed wives may be higher than the costs of the homes of nonemployed wives, relevant to the husband's income. The homes may differ in terms of the time and effort required for housework.

The decision about what house to live in has been typically shared, about equally, by both husband and wife (Duncan and Duncan, 1978). Men reportedly exert even more influence in respect to the wife's decision to work than in the choice of the house. Employment of the wife has not increased her decision making power in the area of house selection, and Duncan and Duncan (1978) further report that the husband has roughly gained influence over time on that decision. Beyrer (1965) suggested that housing choices reflect personal values with certain design features contributing to the expression of familism, economy, aesthetics or social prestige. Familism has been cited as a major motivation for moves to the suburbs (Bell, 1968; Michelson, 1977). Gans (1967), however, reported moves made in order to obtain the "best house" for the money — an economic motive. To the extent that men have increased their influence over housing choice, men's values will not only affect house designs, but, through the labor required to maintain the house selected, could exert further pressure either pro or con on outside employment for the wife.

The addition of a "women's perspective" to sociology has focused attention on problems of sexual inequalities in the workplace and of housework at home (Segal and Berheide, 1979; Berk and Berk, 1979; Oakley, 1974). Modern technology has not substantially reduced the time required for housework (Vanek, 1974) and suburban lifestyles apparently require even more housework than city living (Michelson, 1977). Estimates of time spent by full-time housewives range from 35 to 60 hours (Meissner, Humphreys, Mies and Scheu, 1975; Vanek, 1974; Walker, 1973). Working women reduce their housework by about half. However, there is little evidence to

indicate that husbands or children contribute enough hours to make up the difference in time spent in housework by working wives and housewives (Berheide, Berk and Berk, 1976; Gauger, 1973; Moore and Hofferth, 1979; Walker, 1970). Initially, residing in a house that is more "user-efficient" decreases the potential overload experienced by working wives. Other alternatives include sacrificing neatness and order in a reduction of housekeeping standards, elimination of time-intensive tasks, or increasing time-efficiency.

Smith (1971) describes the significant role of the house in the organization of the homemaker role and family activity. Little attention has been paid to the variation in housework due to differences in house designs with the exception of work-activity analysis focused primarily on the kitchen (Cf. Steidl and Bratton, 1968). Examples of features which presumably add time and energy costs include stairs and fireplaces. Hallways, on the other hand, tend to increase order and eliminate "clutter" especially if equipped with closets. The option of a "not-so-neat" house may create a problem if the front door opens directly into the living room, or a picture window displays the condition of the living room to any passer-by (Goffman, 1959). On the other hand, a house that is relatively easy to maintain, may contribute to the conditions which support the employment of women. Although it is expected that changes in social roles will be linked to changes in social structure, a similar link between changes in house style and social structure is not so immediately obvious or readily conceded.

If a primary reason for a move to the suburbs is familism, and if familism is a determinant in the selection of a house, the result could likely be a house with an exterior which displays symbols of domesticity, such as the openness of a picture window. However, some features which reflect specific value orientations also affect user-efficiency. Since employed wives have not generally claimed that they are working to get out of the home, one might further assume that their houses support them in their goals (one of which is

to make money) and that they are able to handle their total workload. If nonemployed housewives are in fact expressing their own dissatisfaction when they suggest that women work "to get out of the home," then we might expect that any changes in house style reflected in the homes of the nonemployed women will be nontraditional and "labor-intensive."

Assumptions And Hypotheses

The study reported in this paper is based on the following assumptions:

1. that the changes in house style accompanying suburbanization reflect shifts in personal values in American society

2. that the specific features expressing particular value orientations also affect the "user-efficiency" of the house, in some cases releasing time, and in others requiring more time spent in "housework"

3. that the dominant value orientation for the family with a wife/mother who is not employed, is a familistic orientation and that this value will be expressed through features which are "labor-intensive"

4. that the dominant value orientation for the family of the employed wife/mother is economic, which will further be expressed through house designs which are "user-efficient" and

5. that "user-efficient houses" are among the enabling conditions increasing the proportion of women in the labor force.

The two hypotheses specifically considered in this study are:

1. The exterior appearance of the houses, particularly those features defined by the researchers to express familism, will distinguish suburban houses from houses in traditional locations, and

2. Houses of employed women will be distinguished from the houses of the nonemployed by having features which contribute to user-efficiency and lacking labor-intensive features.

Procedure

Sample

The population used in this study was selected to be relatively homogeneous in geographic location, social class and stage of the family life cycle, but to also reflect differences in life style that may have arisen through suburbanization. A stratified sampling design was used to draw from the membership roster of a youth group an equal number of families with boys and girls in the 11-13 year age group and approximately equal numbers from traditional (rural farm, small town and urban) and suburban locations. All were within a 30-40 mile radius of the same urban center which had a population in the SMSA exceeding one million in 1970.

Housing Variables

An interviewer filled out a check list of eight items concerning the exterior appearance and organization of the house: the presence or absence of a brick or white exterior, shutters, a picture window, covered porch, entry hall, stairs (either two-story or split level styles) and a wood-burning fireplace. The mother supplied additional information concerning her employment, household and house size, tenure and intention to remain in that house.

Analysis

Discriminant analysis was performed using SPSS routines (Nie et al., 1975) to distinguish between the housing features of houses occupied by employed and nonemployed mothers in traditional and suburban neighborhoods. Dichotomization on location and employment status produced four groups for the initial unweighted analysis. To further distinguish features of location from those of employment status, groups were compared in pairs. The standardized discriminant coefficients are to be interpreted similar to regression coefficients (the betas computed through multiple regression) but with the group centroids considered for direction of association (Van de Geer, 1971).

Table 1. — Household and Housing Characteristics

	Traditional Location		Suburban Location	
	Employed	Nonemployed	Employed	Nonemployed
Occupation of Husband				
Professional/Manager	29.6	35.7	26.9	42.9
Other White Collar	37.0	32.1	46.2	23.8
Blue Collar	33.3	32.1	26.9	33.3
	(n=27)	(n=28)	(n=26)	(n=21)
Family Size				
Mean	4.85	5.46	4.77	5.00
(St Dev)	(.99)	(2.13)	(.95)	(1.48)
Rooms in House				
Mean	7.78	8.21	7.65	7.62
(St Dev)	(1.72)	(1.95)	(1.23)	(1.28)
Years Lived There				
Mean	11.07	8.93	6.96	11.48
(St Dev)	(6.92)	(5.30)	(4.12)	(6.11)

Findings

Interviews were completed with 102 currently married mothers of early adolescent children. Of this group, 53 were employed. Husbands' occupations, household size, house size and length of residency are described in Table 1. Employed women in suburban areas had not lived in their houses as long as those in other locations. Little difference in satisfaction with the houses was expressed through "intent to move." Most planned to stay at least another five years and most had already lived there at least that long. Nonemployed housewives were somewhat less certain about the future than the employed wives.

Most families lived in either traditional white or brick houses (Table 2). The one-story ranch or bungalow was less common than a two-story house, but more than one-half of the working wives lived in a one-story style. Over one-half of the nonemployed wives open their front doors directly into a living or family room, but nearly two-thirds of the working wives open their front door into a hall. Most of the houses have a wood

burning fireplace (or wood burning stove) in a living area, but nonemployed wives were more likely to have a home with a fireplace.

Two significant canonical discriminant functions were extracted in the analysis of four groups dichotomized on location and employment status of the wife (Table 3). The first distinguished between traditional and suburban locations ($R=.54$, $p=.0001$), and the second distinguished between employed and nonemployed mothers ($R=.40$, $p=.02$).

Features characteristic of houses in traditional areas were a white exterior and entry from a covered porch into an entry hall. Suburban houses were distinguished by picture windows, shutters and to a lesser extent, brick exteriors and more than one story.

The second function indicates that the houses of employed women were distinguished by having an entry hall and were somewhat more likely to be brick. The characteristic features of the houses of nonemployed mothers were a fireplace and stairs, i.e., more than one story.

Table 2. — House Features by Residential Location and Employment Status of Wife

	Traditional Location		Suburban Location		Total
	Employed	Nonemployed	Employed	Nonemployed	
Exterior Appearance	percent having characteristic				
Brick	25.9	25.0	53.8	42.9	36.3
White	59.3	28.6	23.1	33.3	36.3
Shutters	44.4	39.3	57.7	81.0	53.9
Picture Window	29.6	14.3	42.3	66.7	36.3
Interior Organization					
Two-story or Split-level	55.6	67.9	38.5	57.1	54.9
Entry — Covered Porch	74.1	64.3	38.5	42.9	55.9
Hall	55.6	50.0	69.2	38.1	53.9
Fireplace	59.3	82.1	69.2	81.0	72.5
	(n=27)	(n=28)	(n=26)	(n=21)	(n=102)

Table 3. — Canonical Discriminant Functions for House Features of Groups Identified by Residential Location and Employment Status of Wife

	Standardized Discriminant Coefficients		
	Function		
	1	2	3
Exterior Appearance			
Brick	.29	-.28	-.12
White	-.36	-.09	-.74
Shutters	.49	.22	-.33
Picture Window	.66	-.06	-.27
Interior Organization			
Two-story (and Multi-level)	.28	.46	-.03
Entry — Covered Porch	-.46	.27	-.34
Hall	-.28	-.86	.07
Fireplace	.09	.62	.25
Location and Employment	Group Centroids		
Traditional			
Employed	-.64	-.12	-.43
Nonemployed	-.45	.41	.36
Suburban			
Nonemployed	1.03	.38	-.22
Employed	.32	-.63	.24
Canonical	R = .54	.40	.32
	X ² = 60.39	26.84	10.34
	df = 24	14	6
	p = .0001	.02	.11

In the second stage of the analysis, comparing groups in pairs, the features of the houses of employed and nonemployed mothers in traditional locations did not produce a statistically significant discriminant function (Table 4). Within the suburban areas, the presence of an entry hall was the most important item in discriminating the houses of employed wives from the nonemployed. The houses of the non-employed were more likely to have fireplaces and those features distinguishing suburbs from traditional areas in the first analysis.

Discussion

Three features affecting time or energy required for housework which distinguished the houses of employed from nonemployed wives were an entry hall, fireplace and stairs. Hallways require less attention from mothers in two respects: first in directing their children to the proper place in the house, not tracking dirt into and cluttering the living room; and second in terms of clean-up in the event that dirt is tracked in, since halls are typically finished with materials which are easy to clean. In the absence of a mother to direct activities, hallways provide a

Table 4. — Discriminant Functions Computed for Pairs Differing in Employment Status of Wife and Residential Location

	Traditional	Location		Employment	
		Suburban	Nonemployed	Employed	Employed
<i>Standardized Discriminant Coefficients</i>					
Exterior Appearance					
Brick	-.24	.21	.38		.35
White	-.63	.31	-.19		-.63
Shutters	-.27	-.61	.48		-.05
Picture Window	-.20	-.28	.85		.23
Interior Organization					
Two-story (Multi-level)	.20	-.37	.30		.20
Entry — Covered Porch	-.24	-.13	-.39		-.75
Hall	-.34	.90	-.10		.28
Fireplace	.54	-.63	-.16		-.04
Group Centroids					
Employed	-.47	.59			
Nonemployed	.45	-.73			
Traditional			-.75		-.64
Suburban			1.00		.66
	R = .42	.56	.66		.55
	p = .28(NS)	.05	.002		.03

convenient place to leave important messages, as well as places to put things away upon arrival. In general, entry halls contribute to the maintenance of order by directing traffic around areas to be kept neat.

A fireplace, on the other hand, serves to attract attention away from other tasks. Although the mother may not necessarily be the person actively engaged in building a fire, tending a fire, and removing the ashes, the process does remove someone from the housework labor force. Additionally, if not properly attended to and cared for, a fireplace creates a hazard for the family and house.

Stairs, another hazard, present an obstacle requiring additional time and energy in transporting cleaning equipment or items to be cleaned from one part of the house to another. Additionally, they are difficult to clean.

Although nonemployed women did not report having significantly larger houses or larger fam-

ilies than employed women, their houses had features making them less "user-efficient" or more "labor-intensive." Those features may support familistic values through interpersonal communication and family activity. For example, entry directly into a living room creates a greater likelihood of family interaction at times of arrival and departure. A fireplace provides a convenient focal point to further communication in a relaxed atmosphere. Stairs provide greater separation for conflicting family activities.

Based on a relatively limited population in terms of life cycle stage, social class and geographic location, the homes of employed and nonemployed mothers did differ. Features related to possible personal values were reflected in the exterior appearance and distinguished suburban from traditional locations, while features related to organization or efficiency (workload) distinguished between houses of employed and nonemployed mothers.

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