

The “Other” Sex and the City Nineteenth-Century Boarding Houses for Women in the United States *Maina Cazenave-Cloutier*



A furnished, single bedroom, 1907.
From “All the Single Ladies: The Margaret Louisa YWCA,” Urban Archive.

From the onset of Western modernity when the nuclear family became the main format for households, coupling up became deeply ingrained in social standards. By contrast, the present moment is increasingly described as a “great relationship recession,”¹ marked by the rapid rise of solo-living and a generational refusal to treat partnership as a necessary condition of adulthood. While often framed as a contemporary phenomenon, the issue has a much longer history, as do the spatial and social structures that make it possible.

By the late twentieth century, women’s solo living had already entered the cultural imagination, most notably through popular media such as *Sex and the City* and its sustained attention on the single woman’s apartment in Manhattan. Architectural projects also pushed the idea forward, such as Toyo Ito and Kazuyo Sejima’s PAO project from 1985, which explicitly conceptualized domestic space for the autonomous urban woman. Yet this image of urban female autonomy did not emerge ex nihilo. While earlier architectural forms of female autonomy already existed—monasteries or *beguinages*, for example—the spatial and institutional origins of autonomy within the context of a modern, urban, Western society can be traced back to the nineteenth-century American boarding house, a housing type that enabled individual life outside the nuclear family long before it became culturally legible.

Historically, the boarding house operated as a hybrid institution in which domestic labor—cooking, cleaning, and care—was collectivized and commodified. By transforming unwaged reproductive labor into a shared

1 “The Rise of Singlehood Is Reshaping the World,” *The Economist*, November 6, 2025.

service, the boarding house released its residents from the isolation and dependency of the private household. In the context of rapid industrialization and urbanization, this model proved crucial for a growing workforce, including large numbers of women, who migrated to cities in search of waged employment. The boarding house provided not only shelter but the material conditions necessary to pursue economic independence. In the twentieth century, as women’s access to paid labor expanded, this independence increasingly translated into the ability to refuse cohabitation with inadequate or abusive partners.² In the present, this refusal has taken on a new valence, as single life is no longer merely tolerated but, for many women, actively desired.³

However, while the boarding house was among the most widespread housing models of the nineteenth century, the failure of contemporary housing to provide the material conditions for living alone has become increasingly evident. Boarding houses emerged from economic necessity and provided housing for the workforce that made the market revolution possible, organizing both shelter and support within a shared structure. Contemporary housing, by contrast, largely fails to accommodate the collective dimensions of everyday life. The single room provided by the boarding house was, on the one hand, far from a “proper” home: its functions were reduced largely to sleeping. Yet it nonetheless preserved dignity and secured a degree of individual autonomy, even if only temporarily, for those seeking to escape the obligations of the traditional family unit. Today, “co-living” models differ from the boarding house: whereas the boarding house organized community as a functional response to shared economic and domestic needs, these experiments treat collectivity primarily as a marketable lifestyle, rather than as a structural response to shared risk and necessity.

This thesis contends that the decline of the boarding house was shaped by an ideological reorganization of domestic space, in which the single-family home was elevated to the status of a “moral refuge” and communal living was increasingly coded as socially and morally suspect. Today, as gender roles and family norms are questioned and reconfigured, the problem of housing emerges once again as a structural question: How can autonomy be preserved outside normative family structures while sustaining the collective infrastructures necessary for care and economic interdependence?⁴

Accordingly, this thesis asks how nineteenth-century women’s boarding houses functioned as architectural and social thresholds between dependence and autonomy and what their spatial, economic, and institutional arrangements can teach us about collective housing for women beyond the nuclear family.

By re-examining the boarding house as a dwelling type and through the analysis of visual artifacts such as postcards, alongside archival materials, written histories, and diaries, it is possible to conceive of the boarding house as a model that, despite its limitations, may have played a significant—albeit often unintended—role in the professional emancipation of nineteenth-century working women. The boarding house may also have facilitated the formation of women’s communities grounded in shared interests and collective struggle, which, although critiqued in contemporary neoliberal discourse as mono-gendered and exclusive, could be understood as an early framework for organizing and advancing claims to social and professional equality.

2 Ibid.

3 Chanté Joseph, “Is Having a Boyfriend Embarrassing Now?” *British Vogue*, October 25, 2025.

4 Ibid.

THE BIRTH OF THE BOARDING HOUSE IN THE UNITED STATES AND THE QUESTION OF SOLO LIVING

In the United States, boarding was already a common practice well before the nineteenth-century. As early as the previous century, nonrelatives or apprentices frequently received room and board in exchange for labor, and as late as the 1830s and 1840s, the notion of home in a sentimental sense remained largely novel and, in many respects, foreign.⁵ The concept of home was generally interchangeable with the household and carried no additional significance. Boarding, however, would become the *bête noire* of mid-century moralists, despite its popularity at the time.⁶

Historically, this practice was by no means unique to the United States. Across pre-modern societies, both non-paying houseguests and paying tenants were a common feature of domestic arrangements; for example, the Ancient Greeks reportedly rented rooms to lodgers.⁷ From its earliest usage, the term “boarding house” designated a dwelling in which inhabitants could rent space for a limited period.⁸ While taking in boarders could serve as a source of supplemental income, many households relied on this practice as a primary means of subsistence.⁹

The emergence of the industrial economy, with its increasing demand for unskilled and lower-paid labor, gradually undermined the apprenticeship system and loosened the residential ties between employers and workers.¹⁰ In the nineteenth-century American city, these economic transformations coincided with the displacement of rural populations due to mechanization in agriculture and an influx of European immigrants. Consequently, urban populations expanded dramatically, and the construction of housing—including boarding houses—intensified to accommodate the growing workforce.¹¹

The lure of new employment opportunities in urban centers offered women an avenue to move beyond traditional household obligations.¹² With this shift came the practical challenge of securing housing in the city, and boarding houses emerged as essential infrastructure for accommodating the expanding workforce. Estimates suggest that between one-third and one-half of nineteenth-century city residents either took in boarders or lived as boarders themselves. Boarding houses became so pervasive that they were often regarded as a distinctly American institution, simultaneously serving as a symbol of the transient and mobile character of urban working life in the nineteenth century.¹³

The boarding house represented a specific economic model based on the professionalization of domestic labor. Unlike lodgers, who simply rented a room, boarders also paid for various services, such as meals, cleaning, and general household management.¹⁴ In other words, boarders bought access to the functions of a household without the cost or burden of maintaining one. This model relied heavily on the labor of landladies, who dominated the boarding house economy. Indeed, keeping board provided one of the few opportunities to make an income available to women at the time.¹⁵ In boarding houses, cooking and cleaning were not performed “out of love,” as was idealized in the middle-class family home, but were a remunerated service. This commercialization of domestic labor eventually marked the boarding house as the symbolic opposite of the sentimentalized and idealized home.¹⁶

5 Wendy Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2007), 2.

6 Ibid.

7 Dogma + Black Square, *Like a Rolling Stone: Revisiting the Architecture of the Boarding House* (Milan: Black Square, 2016), 22

8 Ibid., 5

9 Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America*, 35.

10 Paul Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 90.

11 Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America*, 3.

12 Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States*, 90

13 Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America*, 3

14 Dogma + Black Square, *Like a Rolling Stone*, 22.

15 Ibid.

16 Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2.

Economically, the boarding house responded directly to the pressures of capitalist urbanization: It supplied affordable reproductive labor to workers arriving in the city without families, while allowing families to make ends meet at a time when living costs in the city were rising.¹⁷ Boarding houses thrived because they enabled households to capitalize on the growing desire—and, more often, the necessity—of urban populations to avoid the expense of maintaining an independent household¹⁸ Yet, precisely by commodifying domestic services, boarding houses generated widespread moral anxiety, as they blurred the boundaries between private home and public economy. Tensions around the economic and social model of boarding houses intensified with the rise of the single-family house as the American ideal in the nineteenth century. Once the home was idealized as a moral refuge for the nuclear family, separated from the market and insulated from public life, boarding houses came to be perceived as their antithesis. In this context, the emerging sentimental conception of home cast the intrusion of market relations into domestic life as a form of contamination, transforming labor traditionally understood as an expression of care into a commodified service.¹⁹

In contrast to idealized middle-class homes typically inhabited by heterosexual couples with children and structured around ideals of domestic propriety, boarding houses brought together diverse men and women, accommodating them in close and often precarious proximity.²⁰ Because of the “free mingling” of the sexes, boarding houses were often perceived as sites that fostered crime, vice, and social disorder.²¹ Beyond concerns over their social composition, they also revealed broader anxieties regarding the meaning of women’s domestic labor. While some establishments may have functioned as brothels, more often this remained a rumor; nonetheless, the monetization of household labor was widely understood as a potential threat to the ideological foundations of the bourgeois home.²² Despite these critiques, boarding houses remained a practical necessity for a substantial portion of the urban population, suggesting that cultural condemnation was as much ideological as empirical.

Boarding houses varied considerably in scale, clientele, and the services they provided. Their defining feature was the provision of meals, with boarders commonly dining together at a shared table—a central ritual of boarding house life. Payment typically included room and board, with meal schedules reflecting the reputation and social aspirations of the establishment: the more fashionable the boarding house, the later the meals.²³

Most boarding houses were conversions of single-family homes, often subdivided with partition walls to create makeshift rooms reduced to the minimum necessary for habitation.²⁴ Their scale varied widely, from a few rooms managed by a landlady and a single servant to large buildings staffed with full teams of maids and cooks.²⁵ Several middle-class establishments referred to themselves as “private families,” a designation intended both to confer respectability and to avoid licensing requirements, while also distancing the household from overtly commercial associations.²⁶

Boarding houses were deeply shaped by social hierarchies, whether they be gendered, racialized or classed. African Americans, alongside various other ethnicities, were excluded as guests in boarding houses in many cities. As a result, boarding houses providing respectable accommo-

17 Dogma + Black Square, *Like a Rolling Stone*, 22.

18 Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 108.

19 Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2–3.

20 Ibid., 102.

21 Ibid., 1.

22 Ibid., 97.

23 Ibid., 90.

24 Ibid., 8.

25 Dogma + Black Square, *Like a Rolling Stone*, 22.

26 Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America*, 34.

dation for them became vital spaces of racial uplift.²⁷ Landladies in these boarding houses emphasized respectability as strongly as their white counterparts.²⁸ Boarding houses acted both as social filters and class melting pots. “Genteel,” middle-class establishments excluded manual laborers and racial minorities except as servants,²⁹ whereas cheaper boarding houses served clerks, salesmen, and industrial workers.³⁰

While boarding houses dominated nineteenth-century urban housing, their decline began by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, largely driven by the conversion of many establishments into rooming houses. Unlike boarding houses, rooming houses did not provide meals: lodgers, or roomers, were expected to take their meals in cafés or local dining rooms, which were sometimes independent or located in the basements of public boarding houses.³¹ Public boarding houses offered meals to non-residents, whereas private establishments served only their tenants, though some landladies accommodated both boarders and roomers.³² Rooming houses catering to middle-class populations typically charged weekly or monthly, while working-class establishments charged nightly and generally housed men rather than women.³³ Rooming houses also differed from boarding houses in terms of supervision and regulation, providing roomers with minimal oversight. By converting a boarding house into a rooming house, landladies were no longer obliged to provide full domestic services and could accommodate tenants who stayed only for sleeping. In many cases, dining rooms and parlors were repurposed into rentable bedrooms, allowing landladies to increase profitability while reducing operational responsibilities.³⁴

TYPES OF BOARDING HOUSES FOR WOMEN AND THE DAILY LIFE OF BOARDERS

DOMESTIC LABOR MADE VISIBLE: EARLY CONVERTED BOARDING HOUSES

As we have seen, the boarding house gained widespread popularity during the nineteenth century, becoming one of the most common forms of urban dwelling. The earliest and most prevalent commercialized variant was the converted single-family home, in which a landlady transformed a residence she owned—or sometimes rented—into a space suitable for boarders. Although architectural descriptions of these houses are scarce, an analysis of period single-family homes, combined with insights drawn from landladies’ diaries, allows us to reconstruct both the daily life within these boarding houses and their identity as a distinct architectural type.

Because these were converted dwellings, their architectural qualities varied from city to city, according to the prevalent housing model at the time. In Boston for example, the row house was the main housing type at that time. In a typical boarding house, the basement contained the kitchen and dining room, while the ground floor housed two parlors—front and rear—as well as a small rear side room. The parlors, with their high ceilings and abundant stucco decoration, reflected the architectural style of these fifty-year-old residences. Bathrooms and bedrooms were usually located on the first floor, with additional bedrooms on the second and third floors. Regardless of the number of rooms or occupants, most board-

27 Groth, *Living Downtown*, 94.

28 Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America*, 58.

29 Ibid., 31.

30 Albert Benedict Wolfe, *The Lodging House Problem in Boston* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1906), 1.

31 Ibid., 5.

32 Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America*, 8.

33 Wolfe, *The Lodging House Problem in Boston*, 1–2.

34 Groth, *Living Downtown*, 93.

ing houses provided only a single bathroom for shared use. The houses typically featured two staircases, one at the front and one at the rear, facilitating circulation and, in practice, separating domestic work from the movement of residents and guests.³⁵

The rooms of the Boston row house were typically classified as “square” or “side” rooms, with each further distinguished as “front” or “rear” according to its position within the house.³⁶ The least expensive accommodations were the side rooms, which were also the smallest. Furnishings in these rooms were typically minimal, often comprising a single bed or couch, a small dresser, a chair, perhaps a modest wardrobe, and a picture or two. Furniture was frequently old, having been passed down between homeowners or included as part of mortgage arrangements. In contrast, square rooms were more costly and usually shared by two occupants; these rooms often featured a spacious closet and access to running hot and cold water.³⁷ Despite these differences, boarding houses commonly suffered from inadequate sanitation. Ventilation was generally poor, compounded by the traffic on main streets, which carried dirt and dust into the buildings. Moreover, these dwellings were not free from vermin, further reflecting the material constraints of urban boarding life.³⁸



1830s lithograph of a typical middle-class boarding house parlor.
From Wendy Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America*
(Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2007), 76.

The diaries of Susan Parsons Brown offer a rare glimpse into the daily life of a mid-nineteenth-century-Boston landlady. Born in Epsom, New Hampshire, Susan moved to Boston in March 1856 and joined Mrs. Haskell’s boarding house at 34 Oxford Street. In 1861, when Mrs. Haskell gave up boarding, Susan opened her own boarding house at 6 Waverly Place. Through her detailed observations, we see not only the routines of boarding house life but also the careful management required to maintain order, propriety, and reputation.³⁹

35 Wolfe, *The Lodging House Problem in Boston*, 34–35.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., 100.

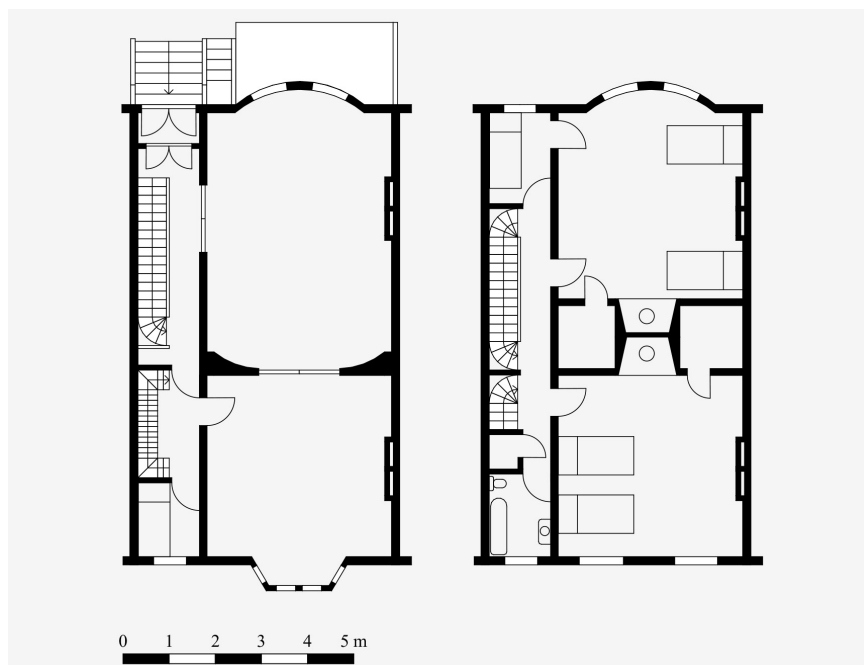
38 Ibid., 36–37.

39 Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America*, 12.

Susan’s boarding house, like many middle-class establishments of the time, accommodated a variety of residents: two couples, seven young clerks and salesmen, and an “invalid” woman. While men and women lived under the same roof—a setup that might seem unconventional by nineteenth-century standards—the house maintained strict rules. Guests were entertained only in the parlor, and only married couples could have visitors in their rooms. The parlor, therefore, was more than a social space; it allowed the landlady to monitor her boarders and safeguard the household’s propriety, especially for her female tenants.

Mrs. Haskell’s boarding house was more likely referred to as a “private family.” This was the term by which boarding houses for the middle-class were often referred, the term “boarding house” being reserved more often for the working-class. This terminology distinguished them from working-class “boarding houses” and reassured residents about the respectability of their living arrangements.⁴⁰ This language also allowed landladies to distance themselves from the marketplace, operate without a license, and foster a sense of community for newcomers from rural towns.⁴¹ Many boarders, like Susan, came to consider their fellow residents part of their “family.”⁴²

When Susan opened her boarding house at 6 Waverly Place, she did not advertise it. Many of her new tenants came from the previous boarding house where she had stayed, a strategy that enhanced the house’s reputation by avoiding any appearance of commercial solicitation. Her role shifted dramatically with this change—from boarder to landlady. She socialized less with her tenants, now seeing them as dependents rather than friends, and the responsibility of managing eight-to-ten boarders became a source of constant concern. Beyond personal relationships, she depended on their rent for financial stability, and she also had to contend with the inevitable wear and tear—or occasional theft—of her property.⁴³



Plans of ground and first floor of the typical lodging-house in a Boston row-house. Drawn by the author, after Albert Benedict Wolfe, *The Lodging House Problem in Boston* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1906), 34.

40 Ibid., 13–17.

41 Ibid., 34, 38.

42 Ibid., 14.

43 Ibid., 34–38, 101.

Much of Susan’s daily labor took place in the basement kitchen, where she prepared meals that were served at precise times at the common dining table.⁴⁴ She handled most housework herself, including intensive spring and fall cleanings, as well as preparing rooms for arriving and departing boarders. While she had a servant, Susan often had to work alone when the servant was off duty. Unlike many landladies who could rely on children for help, Susan was childless, which made the physically demanding vertical layout of her house—requiring constant trips up and down stairs—an even greater challenge.⁴⁵

Boarders were expected to manage their own laundry, but Susan still had to maintain household linens.⁴⁶ She also cared for tenants during illness, adding to an already overwhelming workload.⁴⁷ Shopping, frequently necessary due to the lack of refrigeration and iceboxes, was exhausting despite being often mischaracterized as a leisure activity.⁴⁸ Through her diaries, Susan reveals not only the physical labor involved in running a boarding house but also the remarkable degree of control landladies exerted over all aspects of daily life. From regulating meals and supervising visitors to managing household finances and enforcing rules of propriety, landladies like Susan shaped the rhythms, social interactions, and reputations of their households. This authority, however, came at a cost: the work was relentless, often taken for granted, and demanded constant attention to the well-being—and behavior—of the boarders.

Susan Parsons Brown’s dual perspective as both a boarder and a landlady in a typical boarding house helps capture the gendered and economic dynamics of early boarding house life and the way a large proportion of city dwellers found housing in the modern American city in the nineteenth-century. The informal, converted boarding house was a dominant urban housing form, one that preceded the later institutionalization of the boarding house as a purpose-built and regulated architectural type.

ALMOST PRISONS: LOWELL MILL BOARDING HOUSES, LOWELL, MA

The Boott Cotton Mills complex in Lowell, Massachusetts, offers one of the most intact glimpses into nineteenth-century industrial life in America.⁴⁹ Incorporated in 1835 as part of Lowell’s development as an industrial city, the complex was the site of the construction of eight blocks of boarding houses between 1835 and 1839, alongside its four original mills, specifically to house its employees, a common practice among all companies in the town.⁵⁰ Young women—often called “mill girls”—were the primary residents in these homes, which were carefully designed not just for shelter but to structure daily routines, regulate behavior, and reinforce the discipline required by industrial work. The Boott Mills complex thus stands as a striking example of how domestic architecture was adapted to an industrial context, shaping both the lives and labor of its residents.

Each boarding house block measured approximately 45 meters long and 11 meters deep and was divided into eight units. The four central units served as boarding houses for the mill workers, while the two units at each end housed supervisory personnel, mostly men, in single-family tenements. This spatial arrangement—workers at the center, supervisors

44 Ibid., 91.

45 Ibid., 61.

46 Ibid., 64.

47 Ibid., 75.

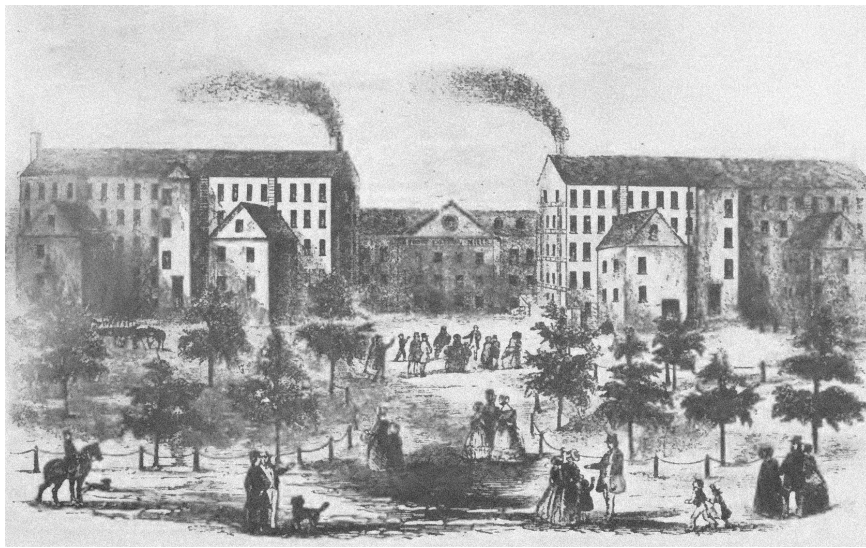
48 Ibid., 81.

49 Mary C. Beaudry and Stephen A. Mrozowski, *Interdisciplinary Investigations of the Boott Mills, Lowell, Massachusetts. Volume 1: Life at the Boarding Houses, A Preliminary Report* (Boston: Division of Cultural Resources, North Atlantic Regional Office, National Park Service, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1987), 1.

50 Ibid., 9–15.

at the ends—not only gave each block a distinctive rhythm but also physically embedded the mill’s hierarchy into the architecture. The design reinforced authority and oversight, ensuring that the daily lives and movements of the mill girls were subtly regulated by both proximity and visibility.

The foundations were tiered due to the terrain, giving the buildings their signature sloping allure and stepped roofline. The Dutch chimneys and the placement of the entry doors gave the buildings a strong tripartite appearance. Beyond these features, the façades were plain, reflecting the material logic of contemporary industrial architecture, which emphasized economy and efficiency. These boarding houses were functional extensions of the factory system rather than simple townhouses, designed to support the routines and needs of the workforce while maintaining the orderly operation of the mills.⁵¹



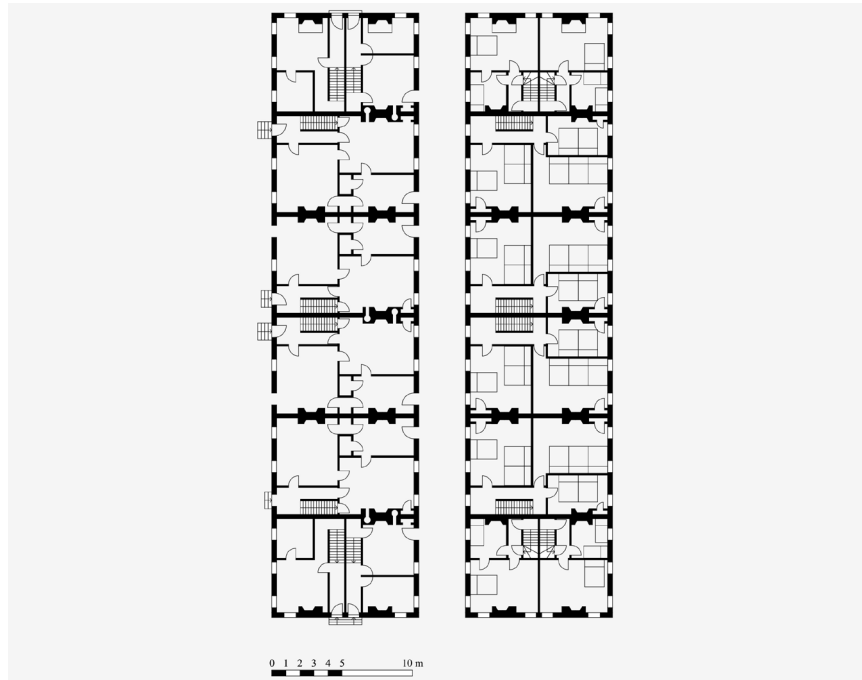
Idealized image of nineteenth-century industry.

From Mary C. Beaudry and Stephen A. Mrozowski, *Interdisciplinary Investigations of the Boott Mills, Lowell, Massachusetts. Volume 1: Life at the Boarding Houses, A Preliminary Report* (Boston: Division of Cultural Resources, North Atlantic Regional Office, National Park Service, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1987), 12.



A former Boott Mills boarding house restored by the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission to its original exterior appearance. From Mary C. Beaudry and Stephen A. Mrozowski, *Interdisciplinary Investigations of the Boott Mills, Lowell, Massachusetts. Volume 1: Life at the Boarding Houses, A Preliminary Report* (Boston: Division of Cultural Resources, North Atlantic Regional Office, National Park Service, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1987), xiv.

Inside, the boarding house plan was highly standardized.⁵² The ground floor of a typical boardinghouse consisted of a dining room, a sitting room, a kitchen, a washing and storage area, and quarters for the boarding house keeper. The first and second floors were identical and contained bedrooms shared by the boarders, heated by fireplaces in the brick interior party walls.⁵³ There were also rooms in the attic. Typically, around twenty-five women resided in one boarding house, with four to six in each bedroom, which were cramped with beds and belongings. The lack of privacy within the house reinforced the pressure to conform to social standards and shows how the architecture of the complex reinforced its paternalism.⁵⁴



Plans of the ground and typical floors of the Boott Mill boarding houses.
 Drawn by the author, adapted from Dogma + Black Square, *Like a Rolling Stone*.
Revisiting the Architecture of the Boarding House (Milan: Black Square, 2016), 31.

The boarding houses were designed to house the complex’s workers, but also to regulate their lives. To do so, the complex’s architecture supported corporate paternalism and extended the mill’s authority into the home. The enforcement of these rules into the domestic sphere was left in the hands of the boarding house keepers, who were always women. Their quarters, being located on the ground floor, allowed them to monitor their boarders’ daily activities, supervise visitors, and report misconduct to supervisors, much like surrogate parents.

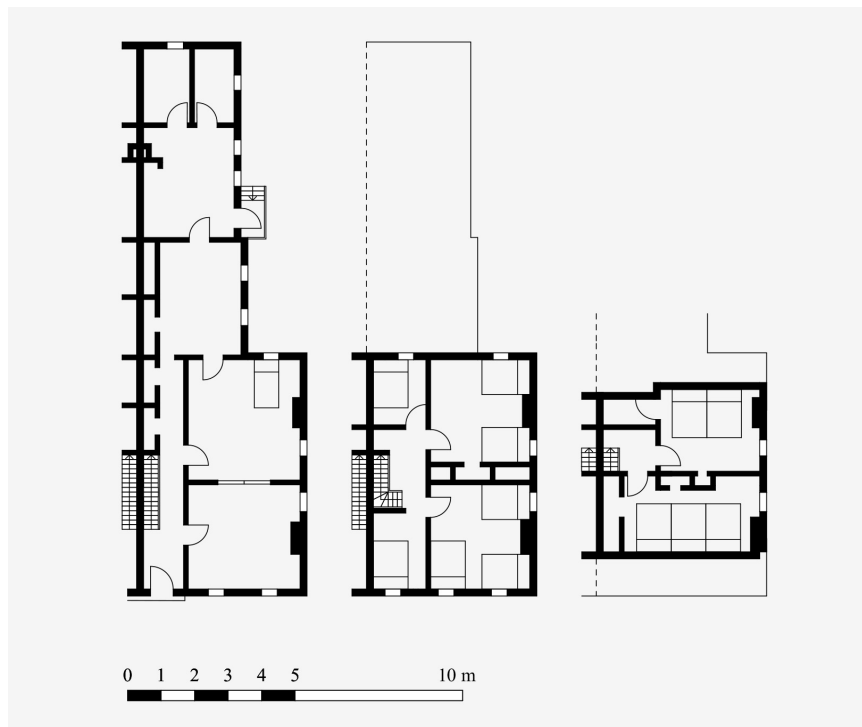
The companies imposed many rules on the workers, and most of them extended beyond the workplace and blended with boarding house rules. One of the companies required total abstinence on company property, and no substances were allowed anywhere on the property either. Residents also had a 10:00 p.m. curfew, the time when they were expected to retire to their quarters. These conditions ensured the women got enough rest to remain as efficient as possible. Most boarders accepted these rules, as they closely resembled the routines and expectations they had grown up with in rural homes.⁵⁵

52 Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826–1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 80.

53 Beaudry and Mrozowski, *Interdisciplinary Investigations of the Boott Mills*, 17.

54 Dublin, *Women at Work*, 80.

55 Ibid., 78–79.



Plan of a typical boarding house for workers at 22 Dutton Street in Lowell.
 Drawn by the author, from John Coolidge, *Mill and Mansion: A Study of Architecture and Society in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1820–1865* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), 274.

The socialization between the women at Lowell made them into a close-knit community but also heightened surveillance among them. If a woman was as much as suspected of immoralities, her fellow boarders could all leave the house to avoid any association to her; the boarding house keeper was therefore obliged to evict such tenants.⁵⁶ Most women were in their teens when they moved to Lowell to start working in the mills,⁵⁷ and the boarding houses played a crucial role in their social life as newcomers. The majority of female workers resided in these boarding houses, and, despite long working hours,⁵⁸ they found opportunities to socialize—gathering in the dining room after meals or entertaining male guests in the parlor on designated days.⁵⁹ These shared spaces allowed the mill girls to build bonds of camaraderie, even within the structured and restrictive environment of corporate housing.

When the boarding houses were first built, the residents were largely New England-born mill girls.⁶⁰ This homogeneity within the workforce was the main reason these boarding houses functioned so smoothly.⁶¹ In the 1910s, immigration was rising, and the mills began recruiting mainly French-Canadian, but also English and Irish workers.⁶² Tensions emerged, and requests for ethnically separated boarding houses arose.⁶³ This shift toward a diverse labor force marked the end of the efficient and cohesive boarding house system.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 82–83.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 44.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 80.

⁵⁹ John Coolidge, *Mill and Mansion: A Study of Architecture and Society in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1820–1865* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), 134.

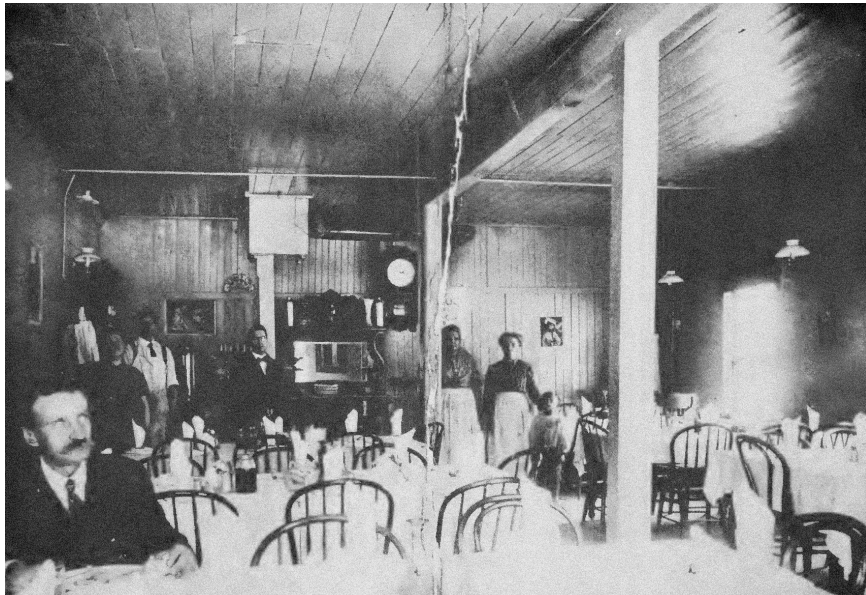
⁶⁰ Beaudry and Mrozowski, *Interdisciplinary Investigations of the Boott Mills*, 36.

⁶¹ Coolidge, *Mill and Mansion*, 136.

⁶² Beaudry and Mrozowski, *Interdisciplinary Investigations of the Boott Mills*, 41.

⁶³ Coolidge, *Mill and Mansion*, 136.

The boarding houses also served an important economic function in Lowell. By offering low rents, companies strengthened workers' attachment to their jobs more effectively than higher wages might have. Leaving the boarding house would mean paying higher rent out of their modest earnings, creating a financial disincentive to quit. In this way, company housing helped maintain low wage levels, minimized turnover, and stabilized the workforce. The corporate paternalism behind these incentives was masked as showing American values.⁶⁴ It also helped create an environment where the domestic life, religion, and education of the workers were all shaped by corporate ideals.⁶⁵



A boarding house dining room. From Mary C. Beaudry and Stephen A. Mrozowski, *Interdisciplinary Investigations of the Boott Mills, Lowell, Massachusetts. Volume 1: Life at the Boarding Houses, A Preliminary Report* (Boston: Division of Cultural Resources, North Atlantic Regional Office, National Park Service, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1987), 45.

This paternalistic system relied on strict control. Corporations maintained blacklists, circulated among the mills in the city, to prevent workers who had violated rules from being rehired. By the final active years of Lowell's mills, however, many companies abandoned both their physical infrastructure and the old paternalistic system as they became too expensive to maintain in the long run. As a result, rents increased along with the cost of board, and single-family houses became crowded with multiple families.⁶⁶ The original model—designed for unmarried, native-born women—no longer fit the changing workforce or the city's evolving housing needs.

The paternalism of the Lowell Mills boarding houses began to be criticized by many, yet the model still inspired experiments which sought to recreate the “sisterhood” between the Mill Girls while removing its paternalistic elements by implementing auto-sufficiency and by affording higher agency to residents.

64 Dublin, *Women at Work*, 77.

65 Beaudry and Mrozowski, *Interdisciplinary Investigations of the Boott Mills*, 14.

66 Coolidge, *Mill and Mansion*, 133–135.

ESCAPING PATERNALISM: THE JANE CLUB, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

As a response to the pervasive paternalism in women’s boarding houses throughout the nineteenth century, several experimental housing projects emerged across the United States. These initiatives attempted to help women become more independent by offering self-supporting alternatives to philanthropic or corporate boarding houses. The Jane Club in Chicago was one of the most significant of these projects. Managed by its own residents, it stood out by its cheapness, independence from charitable oversight and freedom from fussy rules.⁶⁷ In many ways, the Jane Club translated the social structure of the domestic boarding house into one of the first cooperatively run residences for women.



Postcard of Hull-House, Chicago, 1915. Published by V. O. Hammon Publishing Company.

In 1889, Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr settled in an immigrant neighborhood in Chicago to create Hull-House, a secular community of dedicated reformers who lived and worked among the immigrant workers of the city’s Nineteenth Ward. They wanted to gain more knowledge on the living conditions of this immigrant, proletarian class, who would often live in inadequate tenements lacking light, air, and sanitation. The majority worked in factories or sweatshops.⁶⁸ Jane Addams later became friends with Mary Kenney, a young Irish woman working in bookbinding. Kenney had started holding union meetings at Hull-House for women working in bookbinding and shoe trades, advocating workers’ cooperative housing as a tool to help with strikes⁶⁹:

At a meeting of working girls held at Hull-House during a strike in a large shoe factory, the discussions made it clear that the strikers who had been most easily frightened, and therefore first to capitulate, were naturally those girls who were paying board and were afraid of being put out if they fell too far behind.⁷⁰

67 Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1981), 168.

68 Ibid., 164.

69 Ibid., 167.

70 Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House, with Autobiographical Notes* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1912), 136.

Cooperative living would then not only be a domestic arrangement, but also a labor strategy. It would offer an economic buffer and a more egalitarian alternative to philanthropic or more traditional commercial boarding houses. As Dolores Hayden notes:

“The Jane Club’s cooperative housekeeping filled the needs of young, single, female factory workers living on very meager wages, whose only alternatives were to live at home, find a cheap boarding house, or perhaps apply to a philanthropic home for women.”⁷¹

In May 1891, two apartments were rented near Hull-House and furnished. Aside from this and paying the first month’s rent, the tenants managed the club themselves.⁷² At first, there were six members supported by a cook and a general worker.⁷³ By the end of the club’s third year, it occupied all six of the building’s apartments and counted fifty members. Being a victim of its own success, it became evident that the adapted apartments were more or less uncomfortable, and it was decided that a building would be built for what would be referred to as the Jane Club.⁷⁴



The Jane Club building at Hull-House. From *Hull-House Yearbook* (1907), 13.

The new building became a part of Hull-House, and the new Jane Club building opened its doors in 1898. It remained as a self-sufficient project for several decades.⁷⁵ The floorplan was similar to that of the rowhouse

71 Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution*, 168.

72 Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, 136.

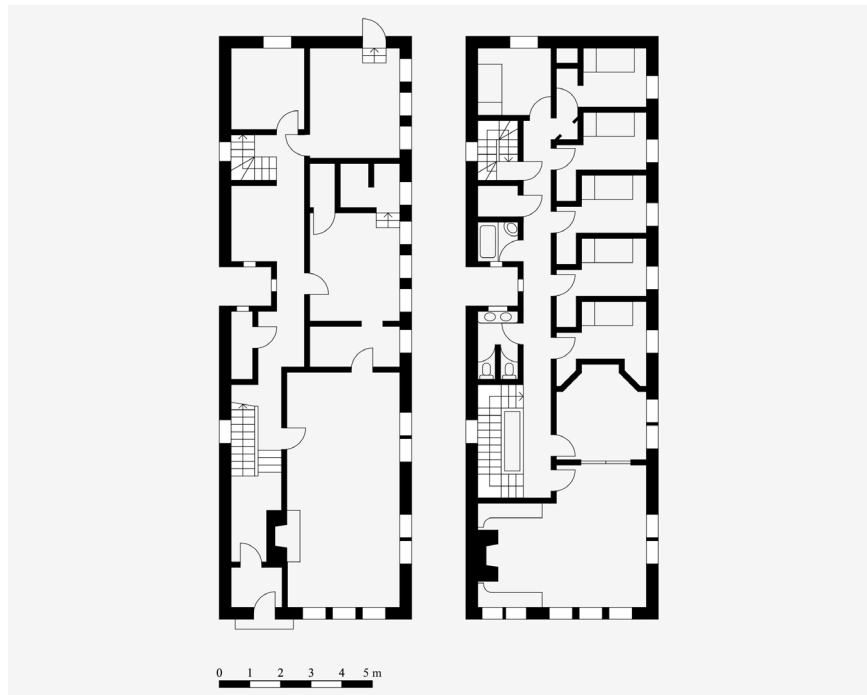
73 Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution*, 167.

74 Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, 137.

75 Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution*, 168.

and even had characteristics comparable to those of Lowell’s boarding houses. As in earlier models, the dining room, kitchen and laundry room were located in the basement, while the ground floor contained the parlor (or “social room”), the reading room, and six bedrooms. The second and third floors were all bedrooms.

Unlike Lowell, however, the majority of bedrooms in the Jane Club were individual rooms rather than shared dormitories.⁷⁶ This choice played a significant role in balancing privacy with community within the project. While collective meals and shared chores fostered cooperation, the private rooms acknowledged the women’s desire and need for autonomy.



Basement and first floor plans of the Jane Club by Pond and Pond, 1898.
 Drawn by the author, adapted from Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1981), 169.

The spatial arrangement of the project, therefore managed to recreate some of the cohesiveness of the popular boarding house with these shared meals and common rooms and, to a certain degree, also a sense of community. However, it attempted to move away from the moral oversight and strict supervision that could be found in a majority of residences at the time. Hull-House sought to alleviate the burden of domestic labor for working women. It offered childcare, cooked meals, evening classes, cultural events, trade-union organizing, social clubs, a public bathhouse, and even a consumers’ cooperative for the purchase of coal.⁷⁷ The Club distributed chores collectively and relied on gathered resources (dues paid by members). However, it achieved this by employing paid domestic workers, whose labor, given the economic realities of the time, may have still been undervalued relative to other occupations, despite being salaried:

Because the Jane Club women were living at a minimal standard, they were not exploiting other workers. Their cook and ‘general worker’ earned about as much as the members did.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 169.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 164.

The members did not need to oppress other workers in order to improve their own situation substantially by mutual aid.⁷⁸

As early as 1893, Addams argued that the industrial world had already proven that centralized, organized, and specialized labor was superior to individual domestic effort and that this structural change should inevitably extend to housekeeping to truly liberate women economically and socially.⁷⁹ By integrating the Jane Club into the larger Hull-House settlement, Addams and her colleagues wanted to offer a residence which promoted autonomy and solidarity, but most of all, it was the community formed by these women which marked Addams the most:

But more gratifying than any understanding or response from without could possibly be, was the consciousness that a growing group of residents was gathering at Hull-House, held together in that soundest of all social bonds, the companionship of mutual interests. These residents came primarily because they were genuinely interested in the social situation and believed that the settlement was valuable as a method of approach to it.⁸⁰

For inhabitants without formal church affiliations, the settlement provided an inclusive environment in a society where religion was highly influential. It also offered a secular moral community, a space in which members could belong and cultivate social and ethical ties independent of denominational structures.

While the Jane Club demonstrated the potential for secular, resident-led cooperation to empower factory workers, other contemporary institutions still sought to address the question of boarding through the lens of religious and philanthropic protectionism.

MORALITY UNDER ONE ROOF: THE MARGARET LOUISA HOME, NEW YORK, NY

During the same period, a number of boarding houses emerged to meet the specific needs of women who shared particular religious affiliations, in contrast, for example, to the Hull-House and Jane Club. The Margaret Louisa Home in New York City was founded in 1891 by Margaret Louisa Vanderbilt Shepard for the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA). It was operated by an entirely female committee made up of thirteen women and was intended to provide as temporary and safe accommodation for Protestant, self-supporting women arriving in the city.⁸¹ Its creation responded to a critical demand of this type of housing for women by the YWCA:

Many difficulties have beset this work, and especially where the stay was to be short. Those who keep boardinghouses are generally unwilling to receive transient guests, and hotels are far too expensive for the means of the average self-supporting woman. Out of this need grew the desire, on the part of the Young Women’s Christian Association, for a home of its own, which should offer to self-supporting women the accommodation they so sorely needed.⁸²

78 Ibid., 219.

79 Ibid., 170.

80 Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, 151–152.

81 The Young Women’s Christian Association of the City of New York, *The Margaret Louisa Home* (New York: 1904), 2.

82 Ibid., 23.

Located at 14 and 16 East Sixteenth Street in the heart of Manhattan, the building was entirely financed by Shepard, covering both construction and subsequent maintenance, ensuring that the Home imposed no financial burden on the Association.⁸³ Architecturally, it was designed to fit the criteria for an ideal women’s home, or as the YWCA noted: “The Margaret Louisa Home combines, in an unusual degree the comfort and protection of a home with the freedom of a hotel.”⁸⁴



The Margaret Louisa Home. From The Young Women’s Christian Association of the City of New York, *The Margaret Louisa Home* (New York: 1904), 8.

This dual identity, bridging domesticity and institutional care, shaped the spatial organization of the Home. The building was organized around an open rear court which also provided abundant light and ventilation to every room, each of which featured a large window with a direct view to the outside. In purpose-built residences such as this, attention to light and air was a deliberate design priority, contrasting with converted boarding houses, where such considerations were often secondary or absent.

Natural wood finishes and the use of warm, soft colors reinforced the domestic atmosphere.⁸⁵ Carpets, curtains, linen toilet covers, candlesticks, a bible, and satin greeting banners in each room were all efforts to reinforce this homelike ideal.⁸⁶ It was also consistent with the YMCA’s ideal of a traditional domestic form integrating religious values and guiding women’s behavior to create a “moral home.”⁸⁷ The building’s plan organized collective functions on the lower floors and the more private on the upper

83 Ibid., 15–17.

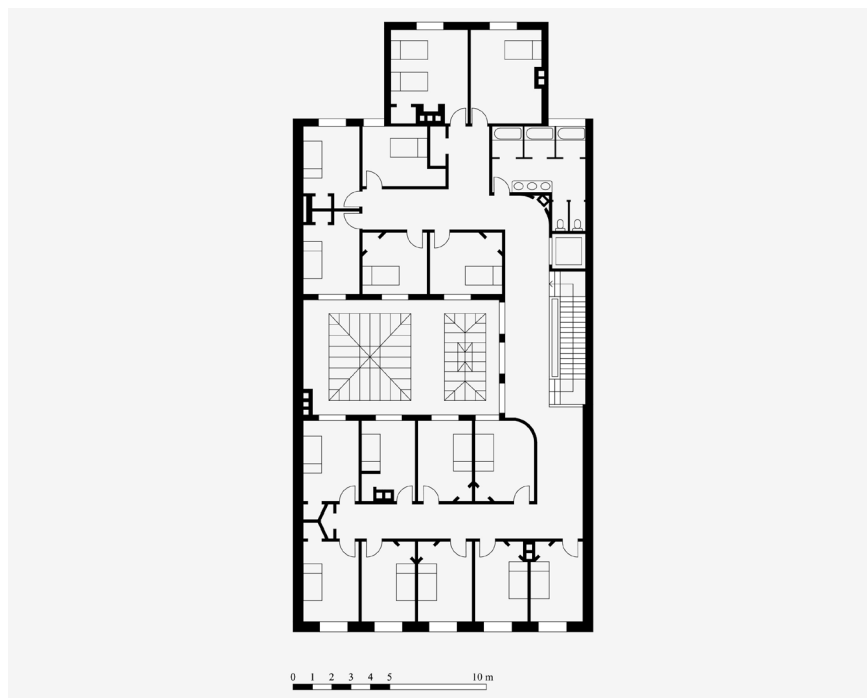
84 Ibid., 3.

85 Ibid., 17–18.

86 Ibid., 20.

87 “All the Single Ladies: The Margaret Louisa YWCA,” Urban Archive.

floors. The four floors above the ground level were devoted exclusively to bedrooms, while the top floor contained additional service spaces, including the laundry, linen room, and cedar closet, as well as a few supplementary bedrooms. The roof was also accessible and furnished, providing a pleasant outdoor space for residents during the summer months. The kitchen was located in the basement, while parlors, offices, and a large restaurant occupied the ground floor.⁸⁸ The restaurant, which featured a separate public entrance, served both residents and the wider community. From its opening, it was frequently overcrowded, offering what were described as “wholesome, well-cooked meals at a moderate price”⁸⁹ and thereby functioning not only as a site of domestic provision for residents but also as a point of social interaction and outreach within the neighborhood. A corridor connected the Margaret Louisa Home to the YWCA’s main building on Fifteenth Street,⁹⁰ which housed the Chapel, Library, classrooms, and Employment Bureau.⁹¹ This passage created a direct, physical link between the domestic sphere of the Home and the moral, educational, and professional support services offered by the YWCA.



Plan of the second, third, fourth and fifth floors, 1889. Drawn by the author, from NYC Department of Records & Information Services, May 5, 2021.

Each private room, had its own bed, wash-stand, bureau, table, chair, rocking-chair, ample closet/wardrobe, and a set of bookshelves.⁹² Though promoted as cheerful and comfortable, the New York Historical Society described the bedrooms as “furnished quite plainly and small.”⁹³ The YWCA noted that of the 73 bedrooms, 37 were single rooms, 25 had two beds and 11 were single rooms with double beds for two guests.⁹⁴ However, Dorothy Richardson, a former working girl recounting her life in her novel “The Long Day,” noted:

⁸⁸ YWCA, *The Margaret Louisa Home*, 19.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 11–13.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 19.

⁹³ “All the Single Ladies: The Margaret Louisa YWCA,” Urban Archive.

⁹⁴ YWCA, *The Margaret Louisa Home*, 20.

“Then Mrs. Pitbladder explained the system upon which the house was run. I could have a room all to myself for a dollar and a half a week, or I could sleep in the dormitory for ten cents a night, or fifty cents a week; all terms payable in advance. The latter fact she was particular to impress upon me.”⁹⁵



Women enjoying the Home's parlor, 1907.
From “All the Single Ladies: The Margaret Louisa YWCA,” Urban Archive.

The omission of the dormitory from the YWCA's architectural description likely stems from two primary factors: the preservation of the institution's respectable image and the provision of emergency service to the most disadvantaged working women. There was, indeed, a strong contrast between the way the YWCA wanted the Margaret Louisa Home to be perceived, versus how it was actually experienced by the residents. As Dorothy Richardson commented:

The home for working girls I found, not very far away from this lunch-room, in one of the streets south of Fourteenth Street and well over on the East Side. It was a shabby, respectable, unfriendly looking building of red brick, with a narrow, black painted arched door. On the cross-section of the center panel was screwed a silver plate, with the name of the institution inscribed in black letters, which gave to the door the gruesome suggestion of a coffin set on end... The little reception-room, or office, was no more cheerful than the front door, and, like it, partook somewhat of an ecclesiastical aspect. Arranged in a sort of frieze about the room were a series of framed scriptural texts, all of which served to remind one in no ambiguous terms of the wrath of God toward the forward-hearted and of the eternal punishment that awaits unrepentant sinners. And then, at intervals, the vindictive utterances were broken by pictures—these, too, of a religious or pseudo-religious nature.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Dorothy Richardson, *The Long Day: The Story of a New York Working-Girl as told by Herself* (New York: The Century Company, 1911), 164.
⁹⁶ Ibid., 157–158.

The building was equipped with modern sanitary bathrooms, freely accessible to residents, which the YWCA described as being of the latest design and highly hygienic. It also featured an elevator and a night clerk.⁹⁷ These elements were intended to position the Home as a respectable nineteenth-century residence for women: institutional in scale, domestic in appearance, and embodying elevated moral values. Yet the reality of daily life could differ from these claims. As Richardson recounted:

In the morning we washed and combed in a large common toilet-room. ‘There were only a dozen facebowls, and these we had to watch our chance to pounce upon. I waited until the rush was over, and after the orphans had scurried down to their breakfast I performed a more leisurely toilet. Two other girls were there, doing the same thing.’⁹⁸



Left: Staff working in the kitchen, 1907.

From “All the Single Ladies: The Margaret Louisa YWCA,” Urban Archive.

Right: Staff working in the laundry room, 1907.

From “All the Single Ladies: The Margaret Louisa YWCA,” Urban Archive.

Women were meant to stay in the Home typically for a few days or weeks,⁹⁹ with a maximum duration of one month. Despite this brief occupancy, demand consistently exceeded capacity: although the Home offered approximately 100 beds, it was common for up to three times as many applicants to be refused due to limited space. Even with the addition of double beds in larger rooms, overcrowding remained a persistent issue. Nevertheless, the Home maintained a strong reputation, largely attributed to its attention to health and hygiene, with proper ventilation and modern sanitation contributing to the well-being of its residents.¹⁰⁰

The regulations of the Home reflected the YWCA’s exercise of moral oversight over its residents. Rent was required to be paid in advance, and activities such as cooking or laundering on the premises were strictly prohibited.¹⁰¹ A rigorous daily schedule was also enforced: a bell rang at 6 a.m., signaling that all occupants of the dormitory were to rise and dress, and by 6:30 a.m., the dormitory was to be vacated, with residents

97 YWCA, *The Margaret Louisa Home*, 20–21.

98 Richardson, *The Long Day*, 178.

99 YWCA, *The Margaret Louisa Home*, 3.

100 Ibid., 8–11.

101 “All the Single Ladies: The Margaret Louisa YWCA,” Urban Archive.

not permitted to return until bedtime. For regular lodgers, bedtime was set at 10 p.m., and electricity was extinguished at 11 p.m., coinciding with the closure of the building’s doors.¹⁰² Residents who anticipated returning late were required to notify the superintendent’s office in advance, underscoring the Home’s emphasis on discipline, order, and adherence to institutional norms.¹⁰³ Daily “family prayers” were conducted in the parlor, and a Bible study was held on Sundays. These practices reflected the Christian domestic model promoted by the YWCA, and more broadly by nineteenth-century American society, reinforcing the moral oversight considered essential for a “safe home” for working women. By structuring both time and ritual around these exercises, the Home sought to cultivate not only discipline and propriety but also a shared sense of ethical and social belonging among its residents.



The Restaurant. From The Young Women’s Christian Association of the City of New York, *The Margaret Louisa Home* (New York: 1904), 24.

The Home welcomed a wide variety of working women, a large proportion of which were teachers. Since opening in January 1891, over 35,000 different women stayed in the home, and including recurring guests, that number goes up to 72,000. There was an even larger number of people applying in the holiday season.¹⁰⁴ The restaurant played an especially important social and economic role. As mentioned earlier, residents and non-residents alike depended on its inexpensive meals, and by 1904, it had served 4.1 million meals.¹⁰⁵ On Christmas Day one year, the restaurant served meals for 370 women, indicating the absence of a home or family ties for many these girls, or their inability to travel back home to their families because of work.¹⁰⁶

By the time the Home was built, social expectations for women were slowly beginning to shift, and new, cooperative forms of housing were emerging and gaining popularity. These afforded a higher degree of agen-

102 Richardson, *The Long Day*, 171.

103 “All the Single Ladies: The Margaret Louisa YWCA,” Urban Archive.

104 YWCA, *The Margaret Louisa Home*, 4–7.

105 *Ibid.*, 29.

106 *Ibid.*, 4.

cy to their residents than their philanthropist counterparts, more appealing to the modern working woman seeking autonomy. Despite its modern facilities and management, the Margaret Louisa Home continued the traditions of the “Moral Home” with its rules and supervision.¹⁰⁷ While this made the building seem outdated or overly restrictive, its architecture, operations, and use represented a larger transition from the philanthropic boarding house to the self-managed women’s residences of the early twentieth century.

INDEPENDENCE UNDER WATCH; THE ELEANOR CLUBS, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

The Eleanor Clubs in Chicago constituted one of the most sustained and popular residential responses to the growing presence of young, unmarried women in the early-twentieth-century city. Their formation coincided with the expansion of clerical and administrative labor, which drew increasing numbers of women into urban employment. The Eleanor Clubs, much like the previous case studies, addressed a gap in the housing market by accommodating women whose economic participation was newly normalized, but whose residential autonomy remained socially precarious. Founded by Ina Law Robertson, the Clubs countered both paternalistic and philanthropic homes, such as those of the YWCA, but also the increasingly unsupervised lodging houses, by offering safe, “respectable” home-like, low-cost housing and by encouraging a more independent way of life.¹⁰⁸ The Eleanor Clubs reached the height of their popularity in the 1910s and 1920s, with six hundred women living in six clubs spread throughout Chicago belonging to the association.¹⁰⁹ At its peak, it also comprised a downtown lunchroom, a social center, a junior club, a lodge, and a summer camp for inexpensive vacations.¹¹⁰

Robertson was born in 1867 in Oregon in a religious family. She moved to Chicago in 1895 to attend graduate school at the University of Chicago, where she lived in a rented room. Many women were lured to the city by the abundance of work posts, and many of them arrived from small Midwestern towns with no social network. Having lived through this isolation herself, Robertson spoke with many of these women, and asked herself: How could the transition from rural to urban life be safer and happier to these women, and how could they find companionship and independence during the few years before their marriage?

Women paid a fair rent for room and board, and the clubs were intended to be self-supporting, distancing themselves from the paternalism and “charity” of similar homes for women at the time, notably the YWCA.¹¹¹ As Lisa M. Fine notes on the transitional position of the Eleanor women:

These women perceived that they were personally and historically at a transition point. Personally, Eleanor women regarded their stay in the boardinghouse, and their work experience as transitory. For these years, they existed between their role as a child in a family, and their role as a wife and mother in a family. Historically, Eleanor women saw themselves standing between two worlds. They pictured the past as a traditional, Victorian world, a world of true womanhood, and the world of their grandmothers and mothers.

107 “All the Single Ladies: The Margaret Louisa YWCA,” Urban Archive.

108 Lisa M. Fine, “Between Two Worlds: Business Women in a Chicago Boarding House 1900–1930,” *Journal of Social History* 19, no. 3 (1986): 511.

109 Jeanne Catherine Lawrence, “Chicago’s Eleanor Clubs: Housing Working Women in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 8 (2000): 219.

110 Fine, “Between Two Worlds,” 511.

111 Lawrence, “Chicago’s Eleanor Clubs,” 219.

Eleanor women saw a different world around them, however. They saw a new world where women bobbed their hair, wore short skirts, worked for personal satisfaction, and embraced a freer morality.¹¹²

The first clubs were located in rented apartments within large single-family dwellings or small-scale apartment buildings or hotels. Gradually, the clubs moved to larger buildings, following their success. These buildings were adapted as best as possible to accommodate the female tenants. The continued experimentation on the adaptation of these dwellings allowed the association to determine the features and characteristics of the ideal group home for working women. The goal was to create a home which allowed women to learn how to live and work together cooperatively.¹¹³

Converted dwellings often carried limitations: The buildings often only had one-bathroom. Parlors and other public spaces were often too small, and bedrooms often felt cramped. Awkwardly shaped rooms were also the norm and often the result of larger rooms converted into two or more rooms.¹¹⁴ These issues are eventually what pushed the Association towards purpose-built structures. By 1911, the largest Eleanor Club was Club Three and housed 150 residents in a converted nursing home for elderly women. Despite many rooms which were not adapted to the Club’s program, the presence of large public rooms was crucial to the creation of a homelike atmosphere in the Club.¹¹⁵



Apartment building at 5656 Wabash Ave. which served as Club One from 1901 to 1916. From Jeanne Catherine Lawrence, “Chicago’s Eleanor Clubs: Housing Working Women in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 8 (2000): 225.

In 1914 Club Six was built by the founders of one of Chicago’s most successful department stores and was specifically meant to be rented by the Eleanor Association. The Association’s first purpose-built residence housed 150 residents. It was equipped with a social center for the girls and young women of the neighborhood, accessible by a second entrance. It offered educational opportunities such as art classes, a library, organized local sightseeing trips and sports classes.

112 Fine, “Between Two Worlds,” 512.

113 Lawrence, “Chicago’s Eleanor Clubs,” 219.

114 Ibid., 227–229.

115 Ibid., 230.

In 1916, the association financed the construction of a building specifically designed to be the permanent Eleanor Club One. This building represented the culmination of years of experiments in domestic architecture at an institutional scale. Designed to house 115 women, the project was confronted with the challenge of achieving a domestic atmosphere at a large scale. The building had a U-shaped plan which set the entrance back from the street, designed to keep unwanted visitors outside the premises. This both domesticized the façade by evoking single-family houses’ front lawns, but also enabled visual control over who entered the residence. No one could enter the building without passing by the reception, which was conveniently large enough to seat waiting guests. While this could be perceived as a form of social control, it also ensured the security of the women living there. The sequence of rooms in the new Club One building carefully distinguished public from private space gradually. One had to go through the reception to reach the grand dining room. This way, anyone could walk into the reception room, but only guests accompanied by a resident could access the public spaces, and only the residents could access private areas, like the bedrooms. This clear maintenance of public-private boundaries was mainly to reinforce the sentiment of security within the Club in an era where safety for single women living alone was a central concern.



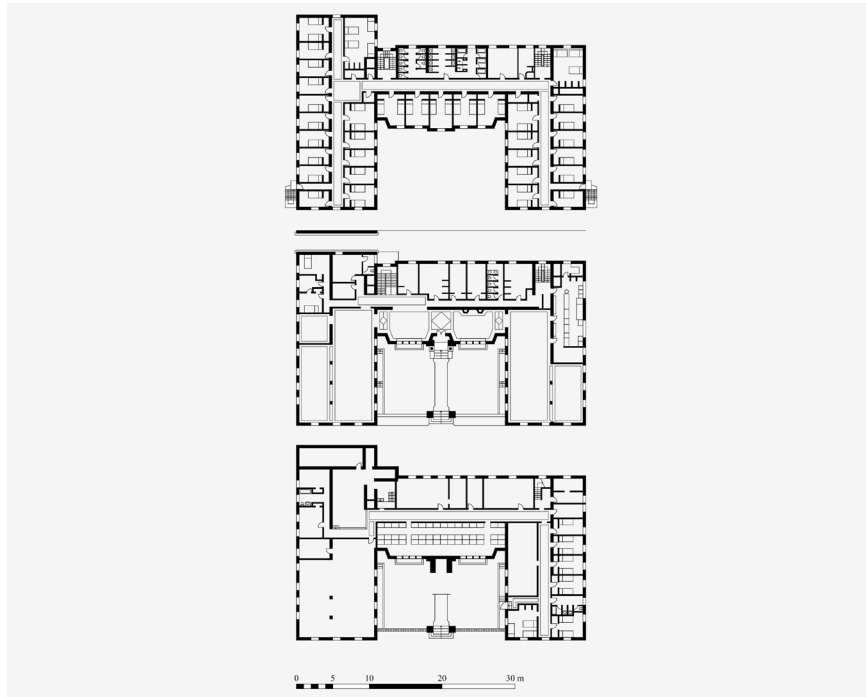
The newly built “permanent” Club One at 1442 East Fifty-Ninth Street, commissioned by the Eleanor Association and designed by Schmidt, Garden and Martin in 1916. From Jeanne Catherine Lawrence, “Chicago’s Eleanor Clubs: Housing Working Women in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 8 (2000): 234.

The plan retained nineteenth-century spatial elements such as large parlors and communal dining rooms, but paired them with modern ideals of privacy as best they could:¹¹⁶

“This club building is, therefore, a transitional form, embodying both earlier nineteenth-century desires for a ‘female-world’ of close female friendships (...) while also bowing to the new ideal of individual privacy and more monitored public behavior.”¹¹⁷

116 Ibid., 230–236.

117 Ibid., 238.



Typical, ground and basement floorplans of Club One, 1442 East Fifty-Ninth Street.
 Drawn by the author, from *Architectural Forum* 27, no.4 (1917): plate 70.



Reception Hall at Club One, 1916. From Jeanne Catherine Lawrence, “Chicago’s Eleanor Clubs: Housing Working Women in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 8 (2000): 237.

In doing so, Club One stands as an architectural record of women negotiating between collective life and emerging notions of individual and autonomous living.

Across the Eleanor Clubs, whether converted dwellings or purpose-built, many architectural elements remained consistent. While women mainly arrived alone to live in the Clubs, several arrived in groups with either siblings or hometown friends. For that reason, the Club specifically had individual rooms, but also rooms for two, three, or four girls.¹¹⁸ The bedrooms often comprised a bed, desk, drawer, window seat, and tables.

With this, the residents were encouraged to personalize their own space with photographs and personal possessions.¹¹⁹

The parlors were specifically designed so the women could entertain their male guests in a controlled environment, while maintaining a domestic and respectable atmosphere. While many nonsecular boarding homes did not allow men on their premises at all, Robertson felt this may have had the effect of pushing girls into unsupervised rooming houses. Every Club had a dining room large enough to sit all residents, or as the Association referred to them, the “entire family.” This reinforced the idea of community within the Club thanks to a shared routine and the ideal of cooperative living.¹²⁰ The clubs also offered workrooms,¹²¹ reading rooms, sewing rooms, and laundry facilities, responding to the domestic needs of the residents.¹²² The services offered by the Eleanor Clubs spread beyond housing: The Central Eleanor Club opened in 1908 in downtown Chicago and functioned as a lounge for the women to read, relax, or drink a cup of tea between the end of work and an evening event in the city, like a show. Its doors were open to non-residents and, by 1920, 2,400 women were members there. It also hosted many social events, like evening classes, dramatic and artistic entertainment, and even sports activities. The Lake Geneva summer camp extended this support network to leisure and education.¹²³



Large parlor at Club One, 1933.

From Jeanne Catherine Lawrence, “Chicago’s Eleanor Clubs: Housing Working Women in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 8 (2000): 238.

Many organized boarding homes, like those of the YWCA, were criticized for their strict rules, unrealistic curfew hours, and distinct class divide between residents and supervisors. Religious participation was also often mandatory. The Eleanor Association wanted to avoid this as much as possible and offer more independence to the residents. While the Clubs each had a live-in supervisor, each one had a council made up of residents who were in charge of keeping the house running.¹²⁴ The architecture of the Clubs, especially the purpose-built ones, reflected such a balance (or at

119 Ibid., 230.

120 Ibid., 226–227.

121 Ibid., 238.

122 Ibid., 226.

123 Ibid., 223.

124 Ibid., 224.

least an attempt to do so). Surveillance was possible, but less omnipresent than in previous or more traditional boarding house models. Yet by the mid-twentieth century, gender-segregated housing was losing relevance:

“As women gained power in society and in the workplace and it became easier for them to strike out on their own, the demand for gender-segregated housing declined.”¹²⁵



Dining room, 1916.

From Jeanne Catherine Lawrence, “Chicago’s Eleanor Clubs: Housing Working Women in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 8 (2000): 238.



Single bedroom at Club One, 1933.

From Jeanne Catherine Lawrence, “Chicago’s Eleanor Clubs: Housing Working Women in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 8 (2000): 239.

125 “Room to Grow: Chicago’s Eleanor Clubs,” WTTW, December 9, 2016.

By operating as self-supporting and self-governing residences, the Eleanor Clubs allowed young clerical workers to maintain their independence and respectability without the patronizing charity often associated with contemporary philanthropic institutions. However, this autonomy was carefully structured through many elements throughout the Clubs, notably through their architectural layout. The residents’ unique sisterhood provided the Clubs with the economic and social infrastructure necessary for the women to pursue their professional careers while enjoying the security of a collective home. In negotiating rather than eliminating oversight, the Clubs thus empowered a new generation of women by balancing security, discipline, and agency at a time when women’s professional ambitions and social roles were evolving in the early twentieth century.

THE EMERGENCE OF A “NEW WOMAN”

The degree of agency, control, and relative autonomy afforded to women through boarding houses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is highly contested, existing in a perpetual state of tension between the growing demand for independence and the pervasive social expectation of domestic conformity. The displacement of young women into urban centers, driven by the expansion of manufacturing, clerical, and mercantile economies, resulted in a rapid expansion of American women’s labor community. With new urban housing models, some women experimented with new roles outside the constraints of the traditional household, where some even sought to subvert the role of women in the domestic sphere. The residential structures that emerged to house them thus became central sites where these struggles for economic, social, and moral control played out.

For many women, boarding offered a path toward economic agency, through waged domesticity for landladies or through relief from domestic labor for residents. Running a boarding house constituted an important source of income for women, particularly for widows or those seeking economic self-sufficiency. As mentioned earlier, boarding houses also revolutionized domestic labor by professionalizing it: this commodification meant that housekeeping services were provided for a price and turned women’s traditional, unwaged duties (“Presumably provided out of love”) into a service subject to the market.¹²⁶ Centralized chores through salaried staff and cooperative or commercial housing freed residents, especially young working women, from the burden of household duties. Thus, boarding houses played a key role in emancipating women who could now afford the time to work elsewhere.

In large industrial cities, Fourierist utopian socialism played a decisive role in shaping ideas about women’s independence, particularly in the United States, where his theories deeply influenced experiments in cooperative living. The conviction that women’s independence depended on the reorganization of domestic labor into specialized, professional work endowed with social recognition and adequate remuneration were crucial elements of his theory.¹²⁷ Experiments such as the Jane Club attempted to translate this premise into practice by employing cooks and general workers at wages comparable to those of the residents themselves. In doing so, they sought to establish a model of mutual aid that departed from the economic asymmetries embedded in the conventional servant–employer relationship.

Yet the relative autonomy made possible by boarding-house living was persistently constrained by institutional oversight and moral regulation,

¹²⁶ Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2.

¹²⁷ Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution*, 35.

especially within philanthropic and religiously affiliated residences. In such settings, independence was framed not as a right but as a condition requiring supervision. The rules governing the YWCA’s Margaret Louisa Home exemplify this logic: they were predicated on the assumption that single, self-supporting women in the city were inherently vulnerable and in need of protection. Moral discipline thus functioned simultaneously as a means of safeguarding residents and of securing the public respectability of the institution itself.

Architectural organization reinforced these forms of control. While individual bedrooms nominally offered privacy, communal parlors and circulation spaces were designed to concentrate visibility and regulate social interaction. Guests—particularly men—were received only in monitored settings, ensuring that autonomy remained carefully circumscribed within acceptable social boundaries. Importantly, the degree of agency available to women varied significantly according to both the type of residence and their social position. Philanthropic homes prioritized safety and moral propriety, offering affordability at the cost of restricted freedom. Cooperative clubs, by contrast, provided the greatest latitude by aligning economic accessibility with resident-led governance. In these environments, autonomy was not granted but collectively produced through shared decision-making and mutual responsibility.

At the same time, the apparent efficiencies of centralized domestic labor often relied on deeply unequal labor relations. Middle- and upper-class white women’s ability to escape household drudgery was frequently predicated on the underpaid work of servants who were disproportionately immigrants or women of color. This dynamic reveals that convenience and independence were unevenly distributed, sustained by racialized and classed forms of exploitation.¹²⁸ Under such conditions, agency could not be understood solely as economic self-sufficiency, but also as freedom from participating in exploitative domestic arrangements. Cooperative models such as the Jane Club came closest to this ideal, precisely because they sought to reorganize domestic labor without reproducing hierarchical dependencies.

Women’s boarding houses therefore constituted critical sites in which the figure of the modern, single working woman was materially acknowledged and provisionally supported. They offered essential economic and domestic relief, enabling participation in urban labor markets and forms of social life beyond the family household. Yet this emerging autonomy was continually tempered by paternalistic regimes of moral and spatial control. The question of autonomy, as these examples suggest, was less a matter of architectural form than of economic position and collective organization. The most sustained degrees of agency emerged not through charity or individual privilege, but through cooperative self-governance—an approach championed by material feminists who understood that redefining domestic space required dismantling the home’s role as a privatized site of unwaged labor.

Following the decline of the boarding house in the American urban landscape, the single-room occupancy (SRO) hotel emerged as the predominant housing model for transient workers in large cities. Depending on their scale and clientele, single-room occupancy (SRO) hotels—particularly those serving the lower working class—typically provided residents with a small room (sometimes only a bed and washbasin) but arguably enough for a personal retreat and needed separation from communal life. Unlike boarding houses, however, the domestic labor was not professionalized but outsourced to the commercial services available in the city. This minimized contact between inhabitants, as SRO hotels often lacked common areas.¹²⁹ More explicitly ideologically driven housing models in

128 Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 131.

129 Dogma + Black Square, *Like a Rolling Stone*, 36.

other parts of the world likewise adopted the individual living cell as their basic spatial unit, while centralizing and collectivizing domestic services. The Soviet *dom-komuna*, for instance, combined private sleeping quarters with shared kitchens, dining halls, and childcare facilities, reflecting a deliberate attempt to reorganize domestic life along collective lines.¹³⁰ In this sense, these models can be read as adaptations of a hotel-based mode of living, operating without private housekeeping and redefining everyday labor as a shared, institutionalized infrastructure.

The separation of private rooms from communal spaces proved essential for sustaining shared living arrangements. Historically, communal residences generated conflicts over daily routines, noise, cleanliness, and varying standards—tensions that were intensified when residents lacked a guaranteed private refuge. The ability to lock a door and withdraw to a personal space thus provided critical autonomy for women, particularly in contrast to the strict supervision typical of most boarding houses. This stands in stark contrast to the normalization of solo-male living in bachelor flats and residential hotels, where minimal oversight was a selling point and independence from domestic labor a central feature.¹³¹

Across the case studies examined in this thesis, women’s boarding houses emerge as a nuanced gradient in which control and autonomy were frequently intertwined, rather than as binaries between oppression and emancipation. The early converted household offered limited privacy but enabled economic survival, both for the boarders but for the landladies as well, and social belonging beyond the nuclear family. At Lowell, architectural standardization, surveillance, and strict regulations created living conditions that bordered on carceral yet still provided thousands of young women with wages and a first experience of life outside the parental home. Philanthropic models, such as the Margaret Louisa Home, intensified moral supervision in the name of protection and respectability, while cooperative experiments like the Jane Club deliberately reduced hierarchy and redistributed domestic labor to foster mutual aid. The Eleanor Clubs occupied a transitional position, combining supervision and safety with increasing degrees of privacy, self-governance, and individual agency. Taken together, these cases demonstrate that women’s autonomy was not achieved by the absence of regulation but through negotiated spatial arrangements that balanced protection, discipline, and independence.

Female boarding houses strongly challenged the dominant the single-family house by institutionalizing the threshold between daughterhood and marriage. For many women, boarding houses provided the first (and only) socially acceptable space to live independently, earn wages, and form communities. This transitional condition fostered what might be described as a shared female consciousness rooted in ideology but also in daily routines, shared labor, and common vulnerability within the urban environment.

Economically, boarding houses possessed high use value, providing not only housing but also essential reproductive labor—cooking, cleaning, and meals—for marginalized urban populations. Yet their exchange value was limited: narrow profit margins and incompatibility with speculative real estate markets rendered them financially precarious. Many landladies, often widows or single women, faced constant economic vulnerability, while residents themselves frequently lived in poverty.¹³² By the end of World War I, reformers—such as proponents of the anti-density Better Homes Campaign—framed boarding houses and lodging houses as morally suspect spaces, threatening the ideal of the nuclear family and private homeownership.¹³³ Associations with “promiscuity” or vice, whether real or imagined, further stigmatized these dwellings, reducing surrounding property values and facilitating their demolition or conversion into

130 Karel Teige, *The Minimum Dwelling* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 334.

131 Dogma + Black Square, *Like a Rolling Stone*, 28.

132 Wolfe, *The Lodging House Problem in Boston*, 64.

133 Janet Hutchison, “The Cure for Domestic Neglect: Better Homes in America, 1922–1935,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 2 (1986): 168.

more profitable, single-use structures. In this way, moral regulation and zoning emerged as key instruments for discouraging density, limiting mixed-use housing, and systematically erasing the boarding house from the urban landscape.¹³⁴

The historical significance of boarding houses, despite their shortcomings, rested on their capacity to generate community beyond the family. This community emerged organically from shared precarity, life stage, and gendered vulnerabilities, particularly in women’s boarding houses, where a managed homogeneity provided cohorts of young, often white, women with aligned goals and a structured social environment. By contrast, contemporary collective housing frequently falters because it is shaped less by material necessity and shared risk than by market imperatives. Co-living ventures often commodify “community,” privileging abstract ideals of diversity, openness, and flexibility, while contemporary housing largely ignores the economic and labor structures required to sustain domestic life: exchange value dominates, rents rise, and essential reproductive labor and care are outsourced or absent.

Without the grounding of shared necessity or institutional support, such arrangements rarely achieve genuine affordability, social proximity, or enduring collective bonds.¹³⁵ The boarding house, while far from utopian, offered a model in which private rooms, collective facilities, and regulated domestic labor were arranged to meet both practical and social needs. It provided a threshold for transient female workers that secured personal dignity and allowed women a degree of autonomy within the constraints of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century city. Perhaps it is no coincidence that, decades later, feminist movements and organized women’s groups would emerge, building on the foundations laid in these spaces—demanding equality, asserting collective agency, and reimagining both the social and spatial conditions of women’s lives.

Taken together, the female boarding house does not offer a model to be replicated identically but rather reveals how housing can sustain autonomy without isolation and can sustain collectivity without erasing individuality by institutionalizing private refuge, shared infrastructure, and organized care. These are the lessons that could remain instructive for imagining forms of housing beyond the nuclear family in today’s society.

134 Dogma, *Loveless: The Minimum Dwelling and its Discontents* (Milan: Black Square, 2019), 18.

135 Ibid., 19.

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