

# What Is Handed Down

## Type and Domesticity in the Dwellings of Henry Roberts

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Henry Roberts, Model buildings plans.

From Henry Roberts, *The Dwellings of the Laboring Classes, Their Arrangement and Construction, Revised and Augmented Edition* (London: Society for Improving the Condition of the Laboring Classes, 1867 [1851]), 88–123.

Housing maketh men—or so thought housing reformers in mid-nineteenth century London. Faced with widespread epidemics and uncontrolled overcrowding, they believed that rehousing the working class appropriately could be the key to improving both their physical and moral health.<sup>01</sup> The model dwelling emerged in this context. Since housing societies and associations assumed that the overcrowded living arrangements of houses led to the spread of disease and poor moral behavior, they began designing and constructing working-class dwellings that would serve as examples for others to emulate.<sup>02</sup> The Society for Improving the Condition of the Laboring Classes (SICLC) was one such organization. Royally patronized by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, the housing society was among the most influential of the time. As the honorary architect of the SICLC, Henry Roberts (1803–1876) played an instrumental role in designing its model dwellings, one of which was even exhibited in the Great Exhibition of 1851, to international acclaim.

Roberts’s model dwellings are of particular interest to us for two reasons. The first being that they are a prime example of “typological design” which architect Pier Vittorio Aureli defines as a method of designing that is concerned with the “deep organization of buildings” within a particular type.<sup>03</sup> Instead of a stand-alone or one-off project, Roberts designed a *type* of dwelling with an internal organization that could be reapplied—but not replicated—in other contexts. By considering the gradual evolution of his housing experiments, we can trace how the typological ideas of his model dwelling designs became increasingly concerned with physical separation within and without the housing unit.

The second point of interest concerns the rise of working-class domesticity and the concurrent eradication of idleness during this period. While these housing projects contained philanthropic motivations, they were also used as bio-political devices to instill middle-class values in the families of the working class with the aim of transforming the idle into

01 Robin Evans, “Rookeries and Model Dwellings: English Housing Reform and the Moralities of Private Space,” *Architectural Association Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (1978): 25–35.

02 John Nelson Tarn, *Working-Class Housing in 19th-Century Britain* (London: Lund Humphries for the Architectural Association, 1971), 4–16.

03 Pier Vittorio Aureli, “Enjoy the Silence: The Case for Typological Design,” *Burning Farm* no. 10 (July 2024), [burning.farm/essays/enjoy-the-silence](https://burning.farm/essays/enjoy-the-silence).

the industrious.<sup>04</sup> By cross-referencing Roberts's designs and publications, we can observe how the spatial organization of his model dwellings were increasingly aimed at encouraging certain working-class behaviors that reinforced the nuclear family.

Before going further, it is necessary to address possible confusion between the terms *model* and *type*. The architectural theorist Quatremère de Quincy distinguishes between the two in *Dictionnaire d'architecture* (1825). For him, *type* did not represent a thing to be copied or imitated but rather an idea which contained the "rule" for the *model*.<sup>05</sup> In contrast, the *model* referred to an object that was meant to be replicated without modification. Despite their misleading names, Roberts's model dwellings were types designed to suit a variety of contexts rather than models to be repeated. For him, what was crucial was the maintenance of the spatial relationships between rooms that prescribed privacy and separation in their configuration rather than the exact positions of walls or windows. As will be clarified in the following sections, Roberts's designs became increasingly sophisticated in their spatial organization, and yet they also became more generic in their capacity to fit different contexts.<sup>06</sup>

## HOUSING AS SOLUTION: DISEASE AND OVERCROWDING IN VICTORIAN LONDON

Public health emergencies ravaged mid-nineteenth-century London. Half the deaths in England were caused by infectious diseases.<sup>07</sup> Cholera, influenza and typhoid were widespread in English towns during the first half of the century. Poor sanitary infrastructure was common.<sup>08</sup> Overcrowding exacerbated this lack of sanitation. The population increased due to migration into the city while the supply of housing remained insufficient, especially near available employment.<sup>09</sup> To make matters worse, the working-class population was regularly displaced by dock construction or street improvement schemes, forcing them into ever denser living arrangements. The overcrowding of working-class houses meant poor ventilation in rooms, a lack of waste-water drainage, and an over-drawing of the water supply. This contributed to the poor health of residents.<sup>10</sup> Prompted by fears about the spread of disease into wealthier neighborhoods and the alarming potential of greater social unrest due to overcrowding,<sup>11</sup> reformers were convinced that housing could be the solution to urban problems.<sup>12</sup>

While there has been significant scholarship on the urban history of Victorian London,<sup>13</sup> a deep dive into the model dwellings designed by architects during this period has been relatively limited.<sup>14</sup> In particular,

04 As philosopher Sven-Olov Wallenstein noted in his reading of Foucault, the family has become the "site of intervention" where "new forms of knowledge and discipline must be applied." See Sven-Olov Wallenstein, *Biopolitics and the emergence of modern architecture*, 1st ed. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009), 10–11.

05 M. Quatremère de Quincy and Samir Younés, *The true, the Fictive, and the Real: The Historical Dictionary of Architecture of Quatremère de Quincy* (Andreas Papadakis, 1999), 254–55.

06 I use "generic" here in alignment with Christopher C.M Lee's discussion on type. See Christopher C. M. Lee, "Type and the developmental city: housing Singapore," *The Journal of Architecture* 20, no. 6 (2015/11/02 2015): 991, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2015.1115419>, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2015.1115419>.

07 Royston Lambert, *Sir John Simon, 1816–1904, and English Social Administration* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1963), 59.

08 *Ibid.*, 82.

09 Anthony S. Wohl, *The Eternal Slum: Housing and Social Policy in Victorian London* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd, 1977), 1–4; Lambert, *Sir John Simon, 1816–1904, and English Social Administration*, 57; Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 19–32.

10 James Stevens Curl, *The Life and Work of Henry Roberts 1803–1876* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1983), 75.

11 See, for example, Henry Roberts, *The Essentials of a Healthy Dwelling* (London: J. Ridgway, 1862), 17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/60100923>.

12 Leonardo Benevolo, *The Origins of Modern Town Planning* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1967), 91.

13 See Patrick Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (London; New York: Verso, 2003); Chris Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800–1910* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*.

14 Notably, Irina Davidovici, "The Depth of the Street," *AA Files*, no. 70 (2015), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43432933>; Jesse Honsa, "The Germ of Future Extension and Perpetuity: Capitalism and the Peabody Trust," *The Journal of Architecture* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2023.2244521>, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2023.2244521>.

current investigations into the work of Henry Roberts are lacking. Architectural historian James Steven Curl's *The Life and Work of Henry Roberts* (1983) remains the authoritative publication on Roberts's work. However, it is excessively congratulatory and often ignores the ideological and political aspects of his designs.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, architectural historian John Nelson Tarn's books on working-class housing provide an excellent survey of Roberts's designs, but they neglect his writings about the role of the worker and his family.<sup>16</sup>

In comparison to his other projects, Roberts's design for the Great Exhibition, Model Houses for Four Families (1851), has received much attention. Robin Evans has emphasized how Roberts enforced the physical separation between the sexes, conflating the "moral" family with the "private" family in his *Architectural Association Quarterly* essay "Rookeries and Model Dwellings" (1978).<sup>17</sup> In several essays, architects Pier Vittorio Aureli, Maria Shéhérazade Giudici, and Martino Tattara have also examined how the Model Houses produced gendered and functionally specific spaces that would reinforce domestic or reproductive labor through their spatial organization.<sup>18</sup> This essay aims to situate their work on the Model Houses within the longer timeline of Roberts's model dwellings. By examining the development of Roberts's designs, we shall see how the design of the Model Houses was not an isolated endeavor but rather the outcome of typological thinking through working in series.

#### HENRY ROBERTS: HONORARY ARCHITECT OF THE SICLC

Prior to his work on model dwellings, Henry Roberts already had a promising career. At the young age of 15, he joined Charles Fowler's architectural practice and spent seven years with him.<sup>19</sup> In 1825, Roberts joined the office of Robert Smirke, which led to his admission into the Royal Academy Schools that same year. He traveled to Italy on a Continental Tour in 1829, where he visited Naples. According to Curl, this was likely the most influential part of the tour for Roberts, as he became aware of the poverty and overcrowding in the city.<sup>20</sup> Roberts returned to England shortly after and won the competition for the Fishmongers' Hall in 1832 for which he was awarded the Soane Medal. In 1834, Roberts designed the Destitute Sailor's Asylum, a dormitory for shipwrecked and destitute seamen. This marked the beginning of the next stage of his career in the design of working-class housing. However, it was only in 1844 that he would design his most significant work with the Society for Improving the Condition of the Laboring Classes (SICLC).

The Society was formed in 1844, dissolving its predecessor, the Laborer's Friend Society. It was chaired by Lord Shaftesbury (1801–1885) who believed the new organization would benefit from the influence of the old society and its established journal, *The Laborer's Friend*.<sup>21</sup> Henry Roberts was at this inaugural meeting and became a committee member.<sup>22</sup> The SICLC was a philanthropic society that Queen Victoria (r. 1837–1901) patronized, and Prince Albert (1819–1861) became its president.

15 Curl, *The Life and Work of Henry Roberts*.

16 John Nelson Tarn, *Five per Cent Philanthropy: An Account of Housing in Urban Areas between 1840 and 1914* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973); Tarn, *Working-class housing*.

17 Evans, "Rookeries and Model Dwellings," 32.

18 See Pier Vittorio Aureli and Maria Shéhérazade Giudici, "Familiar Horror: Toward a Critique Of Domestic Space," *Log*, no. 38 (2016); Maria S. Giudici, "Counter-planning from the kitchen: for a feminist critique of type," *The Journal of Architecture* 23, no. 7–8 (November 17, 2018); Martino Tattara and Pier Vittorio Aureli, "The Home at Work: A Genealogy of Housing for the Laboring Classes," *Harvard Design Magazine*, no. 46 (2018).

19 Curl, *The Life and Work of Henry Roberts*, 15.

20 Ibid, 15.

21 Ibid, 76.

22 Society for Improving the Condition of Laboring Classes Committee minutes (labeled No.1), London Metropolitan Archives, ACC/3445/SIC/01/006.

The Society acted as an organization that would build model housing for the working class. However, they still sought to provide a return on investment at a maximum of four per cent per annum.<sup>23</sup> Even after building activities stopped in the second half of the nineteenth century, the SICLC would publish and build many of Roberts's writings and designs. With the influence of the SICLC, Roberts was likely the leading authority on the planning and construction of model dwellings in 1862.<sup>24</sup>

#### MODEL DWELLINGS: EMPHASIZING SEPARATION AND PRIVACY

As we shall see through a close analysis of Roberts's housing plans, the spatial organization of his model dwellings became progressively codified across his career. While it may seem paradoxical, this meant that housing units could be increasingly generic in nature because his designs prescribed the same living arrangements and type of residents regardless of context or background. The built projects that follow will demonstrate how this abstraction—the simplification of alternative, often complex living arrangements into that of the nuclear family—allowed Roberts to engage in typological design—architecture that resists replicability and uniqueness.

Located on Well Street, the Destitute Sailor's Asylum was the first housing project Roberts designed for the working class in 1834. The Asylum contained a common living or mess room on the ground floor and a common dormitory on the floor above. There was a clear separation between the superintendent's living quarters and the common dormitory, and the second floor was accessed by an enclosed staircase. Though the project was built and completed, Roberts evidently intended it as a type that could be adapted for the design of other lodging houses. In *The Dwellings of the Laboring Classes* (1853), Roberts referred to it as an important prototype for the design of future lodging houses. Acknowledging the need for the "nightly separation of the sexes," he suggested that the design could accommodate the addition of another level if there was an intention to house single women.<sup>25</sup>

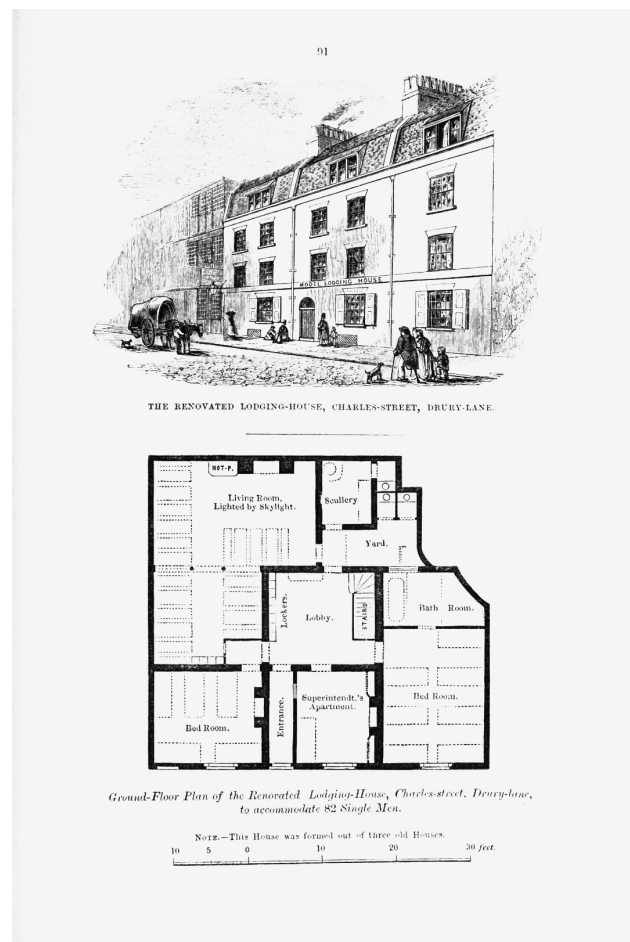
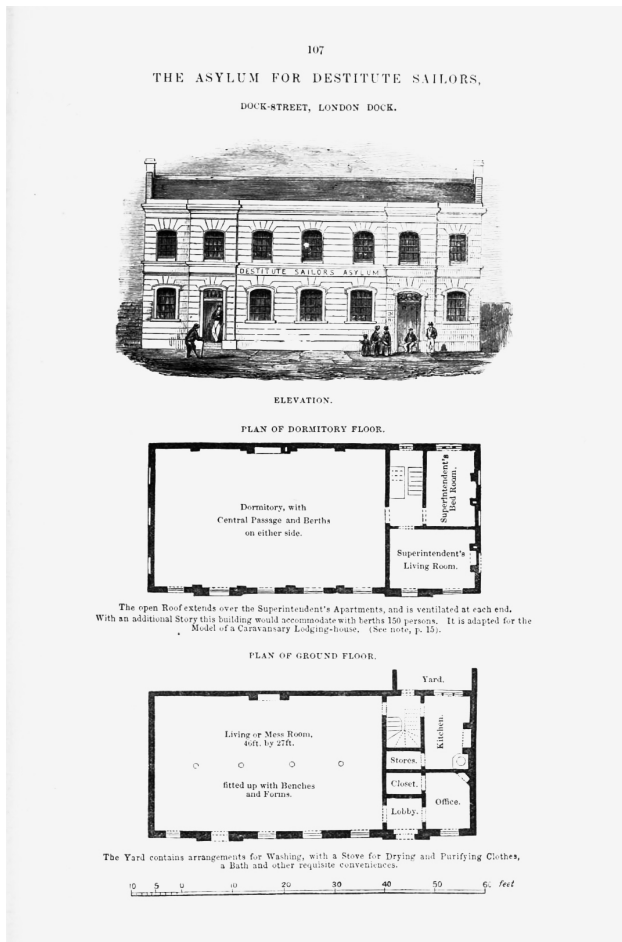
After the Society was established, Roberts was involved in the renovation and combination of three older lodging houses on Charles Street, Drury Lane (1847). The scheme provided an adequate return on investment for the Society.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps because of its complex arrangement, Roberts thought the adaptation of older lodging houses was insufficient for putting forward a new model lodging house. As such, the Society also constructed two new lodging houses. The Model Lodging-House on George Street (1847) was designed for 104 working men while the Model Lodging-House in Hatton Garden (1848) accommodated 57 single women.

23 Curl, *The Life and Work of Henry Roberts*, 78.

24 Tarn, *Five per Cent Philanthropy*, 43.

25 Henry Roberts, *The Dwellings of the Laboring Classes*, Third Edition. (London: Society for Improving the Condition of the Laboring Classes, 1853), 15.

26 Roberts, *The Dwellings of the Laboring Classes*, 8. Interestingly, Roberts mentioned that the objective of the Society was not to lower the price of rents but improve the quality of housing.



Left: Henry Roberts, *The Asylum for Destitute Sailors*, 1834, plans and elevation.  
 Right: Henry Roberts, *Renovated Lodging-House, Charles Street*, 1847, plans and perspective.  
 From Henry Roberts, *The Dwellings of the Laboring Classes, Their Arrangement and Construction*, Revised and Augmented Edition (London: Society for Improving the Condition of the Laboring Classes, 1867 [1851]), 91, 107.

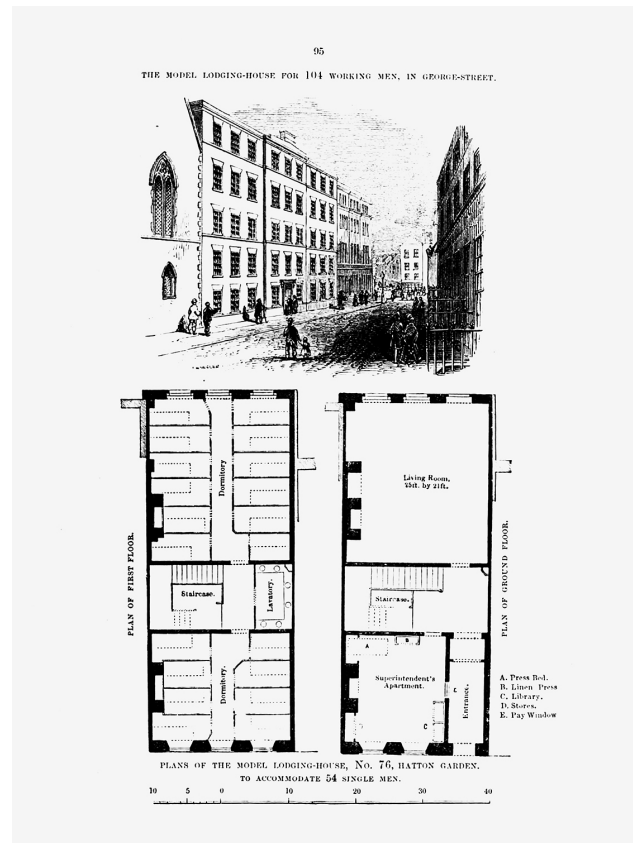
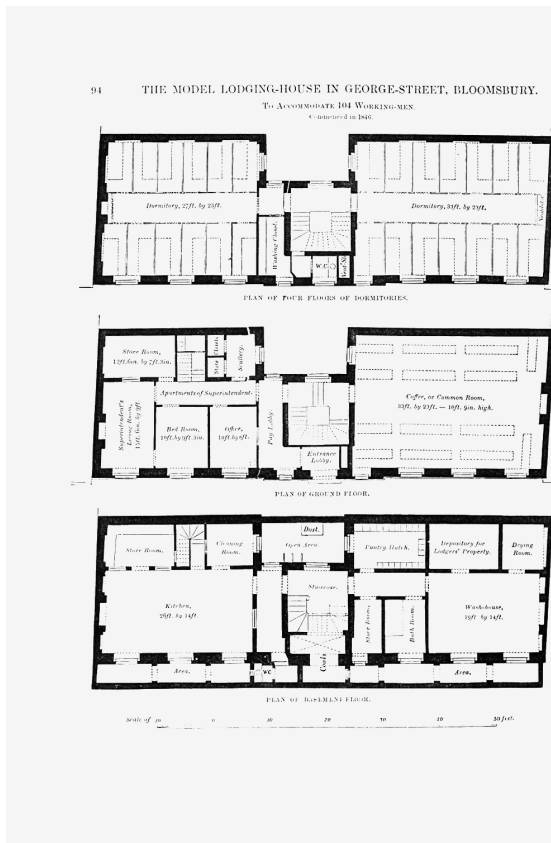
From the plans, it is clear that the two lodging houses were meant to further develop the earlier Destitute Sailor's Asylum. The ground floors were reserved for the common areas and the superintendent's quarters. The residential floors above were split into two parts by a central staircase. Each part corresponds roughly to the spatial organization prescribed by the Asylum where a central corridor separates the row of dorm rooms. Importantly, the rooms were given separate partitions that gave the inhabitants more privacy. This was important to Roberts to include despite no risk of mixing genders in the single-sex lodging-houses. The buildings were designed specifically to accommodate this additional enclosure for residents even if it meant that each would accommodate fewer residents.

Roberts believed that these designs would improve the health of the inhabitants by providing better ventilation and sanitation in the lodging houses.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, they seem to have spared the residents from cholera as it ravaged nearby neighborhoods. More importantly, however, he believed that the provision of a "distinct" living room, kitchen, and wash-house, and "separation and retirement in the sleeping apartments," would increase the comfort of the inhabitants.<sup>28</sup> This increase in comfort would in turn "elevate" them to become "moral and intellectual beings."<sup>29</sup> This idea of privacy and separation of domestic function would become increasingly prevalent in his later designs.

27 Ibid, 9.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.



Left and Top Right: Henry Roberts, Model Lodging-House on George Street, 1847, plans and perspective.

Bottom Right: Henry Roberts, Model Lodging-House in Hatton Garden, 1848, plans.

From Henry Roberts, *The Dwellings of the Laboring Classes, Their Arrangement and Construction*, Revised and Augmented Edition (London: Society for Improving the Condition of the Laboring Classes, 1867 [1851]), 94–95.

Despite the success of these model lodging-houses in terms of investment returns and sanitation, Roberts was generally pessimistic about the conditions of lodging houses. In *The Dwellings of the Laboring Classes* (1853), he argued that many of them could be described as the “hotbeds of vice and crime.”<sup>30</sup> Eventually, Roberts would turn to the design of housing for families, which he deemed as some of the “most important” model buildings of the Society, rather than lodging-houses, for much of his future career.<sup>31</sup> Roberts did not offer much explanation about this transition. However, later, in *The Essentials of a Healthy Dwelling* (1862), Roberts did mention that he thought houses for families were always a better investment for the financiers than lodging-houses.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the aforementioned problem of overcrowding—particularly how multiple families resided in a single home—must have been prevalent enough to command his attention given that he mentions this in many of his later publications.<sup>33</sup> His obsessive concern about the living arrangements of the family in later projects, however, hints that financing may not have been the only reason.

The earliest project that housed both single laborers and families was the Model Buildings near Bagnigge Wells (1846) on the Lower Road, Pentonville, which provided housing for 20 families and 30 widows. The

30 Ibid, 8.

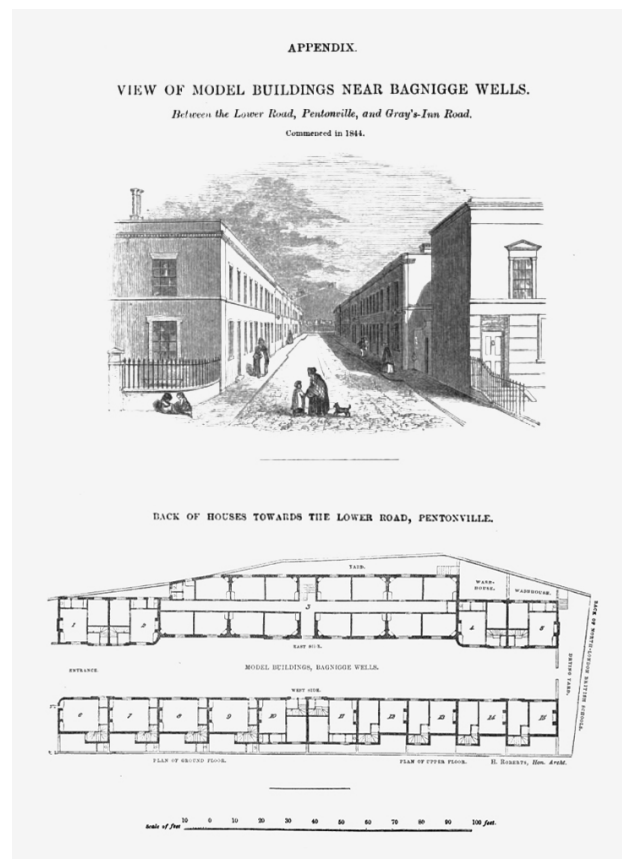
31 Ibid, 10.

32 Roberts, *The Essentials of a Healthy Dwelling*, 19.

33 Roberts also notes that lodging-houses are often more vacant than houses for families. See Roberts, *The Dwellings of the Laboring Classes*, 68; Henry Roberts, *The Improvement of the Dwellings of the Laboring Classes* (London: J. Ridgway: Knight, 1859), 18. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/60100214>; Henry Roberts, *Healthy Dwellings, and Prevailing Sanitary Defects in the Homes of the Working Classes* (London: Ladies' Sanitary Association, 1861), 32–34.

scheme comprised three housing types. Twelve two-room units were designed for twelve families.<sup>34</sup> The units above were identical to those on the lower floors and spread across the floor plan. These units would share a party wall but have separate enclosed staircases. Eight three-room units were designed for eight families.<sup>35</sup> The living room and bedrooms were connected by a private enclosed staircase. As such the ground floor and first floor were different in plan. Lastly, a larger building with a double-loaded corridor was provided for the widows.<sup>36</sup> Each woman would reside in a one-room unit.

In this initial scheme, the high degree of separation and privacy between housing units—and therefore, families—is already evident, although the scheme is not quite as efficient as later designs. The early differentiation between the living room and the bedroom can also be observed in their different sizes. In the one-bedroom unit, the area of the larger room is 130 square feet while the smaller room was about 80 square feet. Notably, the spatial organization of the widows' rooms follow Roberts's designs for the lodging houses, signaling a clear continuity in design thinking. The rooms are organized along a central corridor, accessed by a central staircase. The large number and types of units make this project a composite of different arrangements, rendering it less easily modified and adapted as a type.<sup>37</sup>



Henry Roberts, Model Buildings near Bagnigge Wells, 1846, perspective and plans.

From Henry Roberts, *The Dwellings of the Laboring Classes, Their Arrangement and Construction*, Revised and Augmented Edition (London: Society for Improving the Condition of the Laboring Classes, 1867 [1851]), 88–89.

34 Houses No. 1, 2, 4, 5, 10, and 11.

35 Houses No. 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, and 15.

36 House No. 3.

37 This project was criticized by architectural historian John Nelson Tarn for being too crowded and therefore too far removed from the “ideal” solution. See Tarn, *Five per cent philanthropy*, 17.

The Model Houses for Families in Streatham Street, Bloomsbury (1850) was one of Henry Roberts's most successful projects of the time. The project accommodated 48 families in two-room and three-room units, incorporating a large courtyard for the families to use and a shared open gallery that would allow entry into the housing units. While there were generous communal provisions, domestic privacy became more defined within the unit. Unit plans were also intended to be easily repeatable, moving away from duplex configurations. For Roberts, these Model Houses demonstrated how the plan could preserve the "domestic privacy and independence of each family" and enforce the "disconnection of their apartments."<sup>38</sup> He claimed that this would prevent the spread of diseases, but—as I discuss later—the architects and reformers of nineteenth-century England often conflated physical and moral health. Enforcing privacy between families by separating them meant the prevention of communal gatherings in small, enclosed spaces because it was feared that immorality and vice could breed there.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, the low financial returns discouraged investment, and the Streatham Street Model Houses were not able to encourage the construction of more developments with such generous communal space.<sup>40</sup>

With this project, Roberts demonstrated how dwellings could be further defined and separated while creating common spaces for communal use. It tested the benefits of the open staircase and the gallery which would feature in his later work. With this design, Roberts was also able to position the windows of the scullery to open towards the open air. In contrast to designs of other housing associations, Roberts's dwellings could avoid the hefty window taxes of the time and still provide adequate ventilation to the spaces for cooking.<sup>41</sup> This scheme was more functionally defined than the houses at Bagnigge Wells in that a separate room was created to house the scullery and water closet.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the floor plans on the ground floor were more or less intended to be repeated above unlike the duplex units of Bagnigge Wells. Even so, the unit plans of the project were yet to be standardized. In particular, the units near the vertical circulation and the corners of the project have slightly awkward organizations likely to accommodate the site. Despite these local modifications, it is clear that Roberts intended for the units to be applied and adapted as he illustrated a typical plan to illustrate the ideal spatial relationships of the project.

In the same year, Roberts designed the Thanksgiving Model Buildings in Portpool Lane, Gray's Inn Lane (1850). This scheme was designed for 20 families and 128 single women. In contrast to the enclosed staircases and circulation spaces in the earlier Model Dwellings near Bagnigge Wells, this design fully made use of the open common stair, providing much-needed ventilation to circulatory spaces. The design of the one-room units for single women was fairly similar to the houses at Bagnigge Wells, a more private version of the dorm beds seen in Roberts's early lodging-house plans. Like the Streatham Street dwellings, there were generous communal provisions. However, while the public bath and wash house was of great value to the neighborhood, the rents charged were not profitable enough for an adequate return on investments.<sup>43</sup> Once again, it seems like the communal spaces that were provided were deemed too expensive.

38 Roberts, *The Dwellings of the Laboring Classes*, 10–11.

39 See Evans, "Rookeries and Model Dwellings," 25–35.

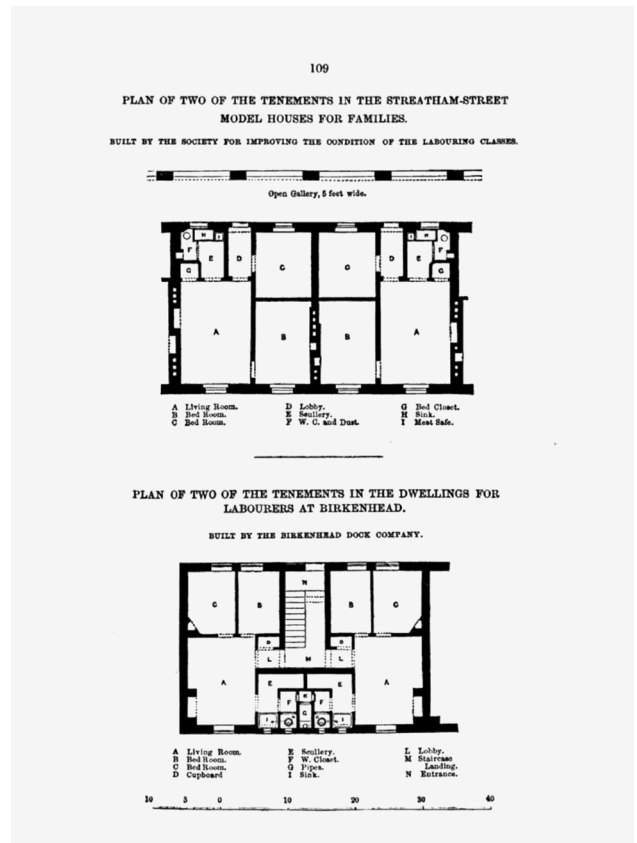
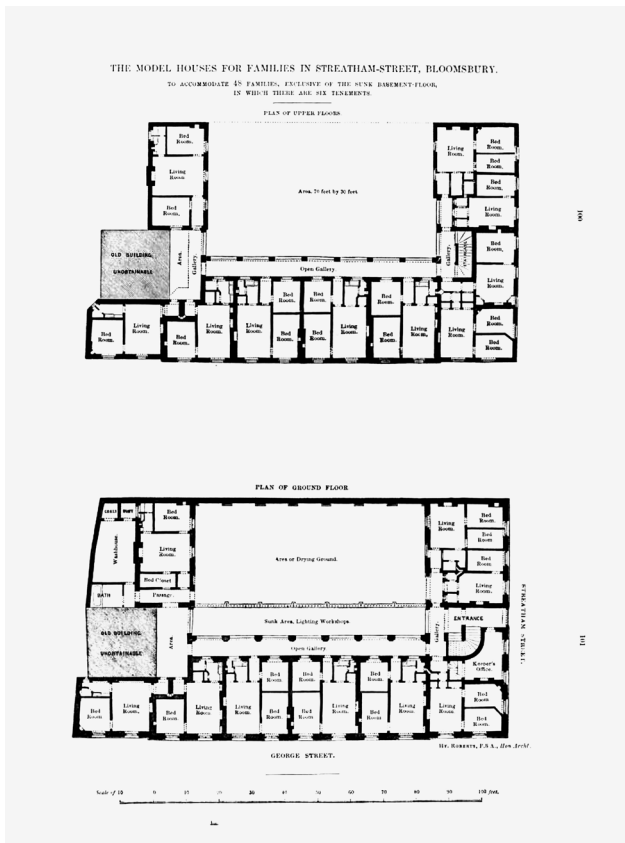
40 Curl, *The Life and Work of Henry Roberts*, 89.

41 One such organization was the Metropolitan Association for Improving the Dwellings of the Industrious Classes (MAIDIC). Roberts was critical of the central and enclosed staircase in MAIDIC's design of the Family Houses for Workmen in St. Pancras (1848) because it led to heavy taxes for the additional windows near the scullery. See Roberts, *The Dwellings of the Laboring Classes*, 15.

42 The scullery was a small kitchen usually located at the back of the house.

43 Roberts, *The Improvement of the Dwellings of the Laboring Classes*, 18.





Left: Henry Roberts, Streatham Street Model Houses for Families, 1850, plan of the upper floor.

Right: Henry Roberts, Streatham Street Model Houses for Families, 1850, unit plan.

From Henry Roberts, *The Dwellings of the Laboring Classes, Their Arrangement and Construction*, Revised and Augmented Edition (London: Society for Improving the Condition of the Laboring Classes, 1867 [1851]), 100, 109.

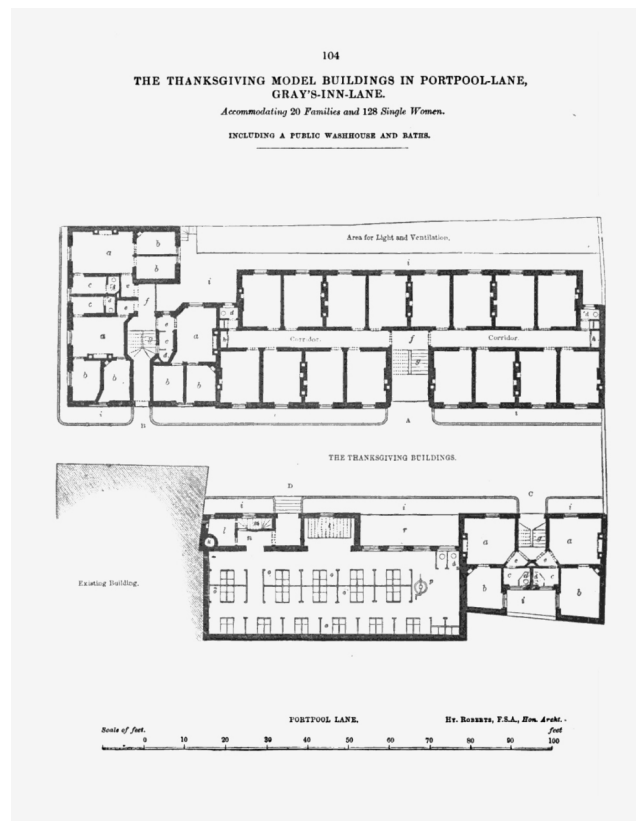
What is most interesting about this scheme is that it seems to be where Roberts first experimented with the open-air vertical core which we will examine in detail with the Model Houses for Four Families. The design of the Model Building for Eight Families within the Thanksgiving Model Buildings in this scheme further reduced the shared entry space to the minimum. The triangular lobby allowed entry into the unit. The scullery separated the other spaces from the bedroom while the scullery and water closets were ventilated with an opening on the other side. The Model Houses for Four Families would make this spatial diagram more explicit and include rooms for greater spatial division in the house.

The Model Houses for Four Families (1851) was Roberts’s most famous design. His scheme was a generic solution that could be applied as a type and adapted to the necessary densities of potential contexts.<sup>44</sup> The plans could be indefinitely expanded vertically and horizontally. Each floor could be repeated vertically by adjusting the thickness of the structural walls.<sup>45</sup> They could also be arrayed horizontally as pairs of houses given their symmetry.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the “Model Houses” could theoretically be adapted to completely different situations, removed from concerns related to site and context. Rather than a unique building or a “model,” it was a “type” of housing in line with Quatremère de Quincy’s definition.

44 Roberts, *The Dwellings of the Laboring Classes*, 57.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.



Henry Roberts, Thanksgiving Model Buildings in Portpool Lane, Gray's Inn Lane, 1850.

Bottom Right: Henry Roberts, The Model Building for Eight Families, 1850.

From Henry Roberts, *The Dwellings of the Laboring Classes, Their Arrangement and Construction*, Revised and Augmented Edition (London: Society for Improving the Condition of the Laboring Classes, 1867 [1851]), 104.

The Model Houses for Four Families represented the culmination of Roberts's work because it reinforced the separation of families by placing staircases in a recess in the front of the building. This limited communal space and the need to cross into the spaces of the neighbor's home.<sup>47</sup> The transformation of the shared open gallery into the minimal private vertical core was also acknowledged by Roberts to be the primary innovation of the project.<sup>48</sup> The recessed staircase was open to the air and reduced circulatory space outside the housing unit to a minimum. Furthermore, each dwelling contained a private scullery, closet, water supply, fireplace, and dust shaft—making it an autonomous dwelling separate from the rest of the building.<sup>49</sup> The designs would enforce physical and moral health by ensuring ventilation, the separation of sexes, and the reduction of overcrowding.

The Model Houses also established a clear hierarchy in the organization of rooms within the individual housing units. Within the unit, rooms were separated based on gender while their functions were clearly prescribed since Roberts believed this was "essential to morality and decency."<sup>50</sup> Each room had a distinct point of access and a window with open air.<sup>51</sup> The children's rooms were deliberately designed to be smaller and connected to the living room.<sup>52</sup> This would allow "the exercise of parental watchfulness" and prevent the "unwholesome crowding of the living

47 Tattara and Aureli, "The Home at Work: A Genealogy of Housing for the Laboring Classes," 199.

48 Roberts, *The Dwellings of the Laboring Classes*, 57.

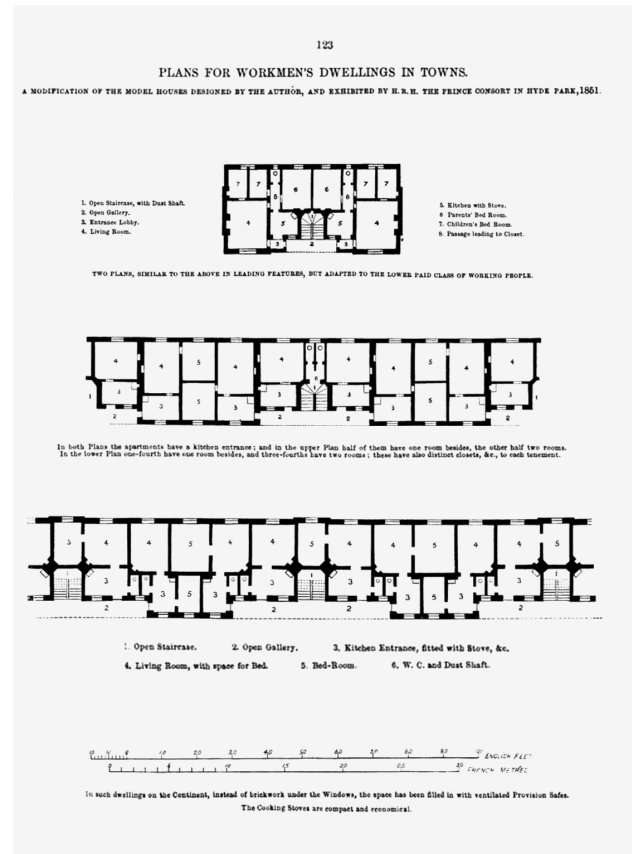
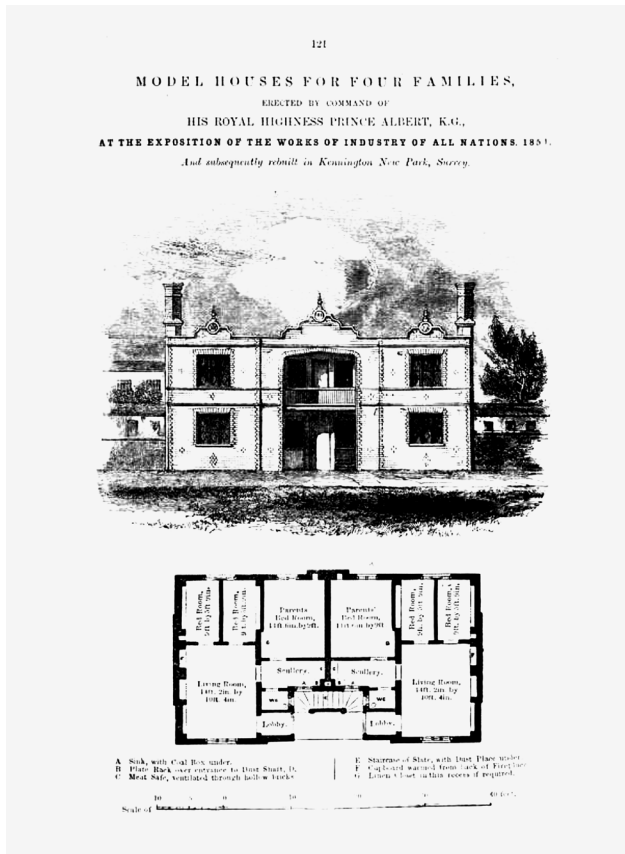
49 Tarn, *Five per cent philanthropy*, 21.

50 Roberts, *The Dwellings of the Laboring Classes*, 57.

51 Although, to be accurate, the children's bedrooms would share one larger window.

52 The children's bedrooms were about 50 square feet each while the parents' bedrooms were around 100 square feet.

room” by using it as another room for sleeping.<sup>53</sup> The parents’ bedrooms were designed to be twice the size of the children’s and would be entered through the scullery. Roberts argued that this approach could help isolate the room in the event of illness.<sup>54</sup> This clear separation of rooms with the right proportion of inhabitants would be reinforced in Roberts’s later writings, as he believed it was necessary for a “well-ordered domiciliary life.”<sup>55</sup> Before this design, bedrooms provided were generally evenly sized, undifferentiated into child’s or parent’s rooms. To reinforce the separation of the sexes, Roberts designed two smaller rooms for the children in case they were of different genders.



Left: Henry Roberts, Model Houses for Four Families, 1851, plan and elevation.

Right: Henry Roberts, Model Houses in Hyde Park, 1851, plans.

From Henry Roberts, *The Dwellings of the Laboring Classes, Their Arrangement and Construction*, Revised and Augmented Edition (London: Society for Improving the Condition of the Laboring Classes, 1867 [1851]), 121, 123.

Overall, Roberts was extremely successful at realizing his goals of improving the health of these spaces. According to Curl, the tenants who lived in many of the houses that Roberts built were able to escape the cholera epidemics of 1849 and 1854.<sup>56</sup> Roberts’s attention to ventilation, sound construction, sanitation and, importantly, separation improved the health of the laboring-class residents. His designs, however, reinforced privacy and separation between and within the housing units. Most notably, in the Model Houses for Four Families, the common open gallery and staircases were reduced to the private vertical core. The units themselves became

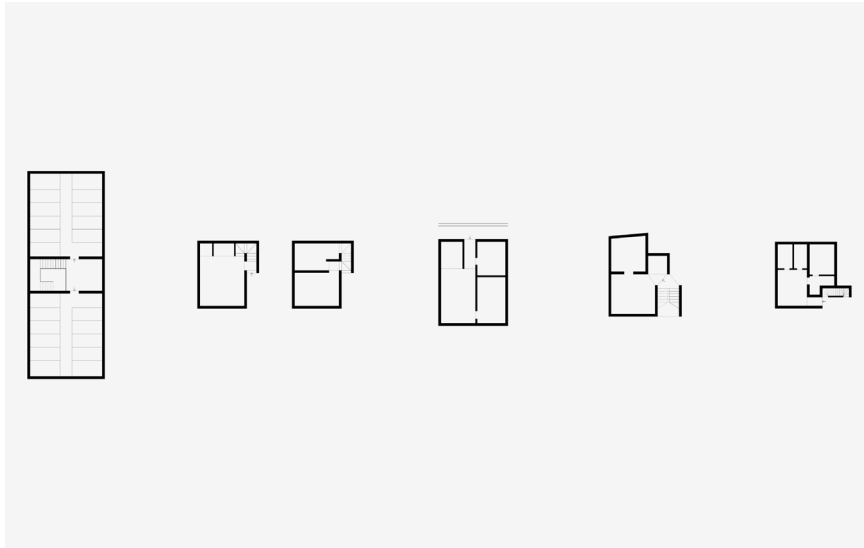
53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Roberts, *Healthy Dwellings, and Prevailing Sanitary Defects in the Homes of the Working Classes*, 14; Roberts, *The Essentials of a Healthy Dwelling*, 36.

56 Curl, *The Life and Work of Henry Roberts*, 109.

entirely independent of one another. While the sanitary conditions would be significantly improved, this would divorce laboring class families from previous social groups and structures.<sup>57</sup> The rooms were given clear functions and created further separations within the unit. Aureli and Giudici have argued that “this model is a strategic attempt to divide genders, ages, and activities to better institutionalize domestic labor.”<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, Giudici has asserted that this spatial organization of increasing privacy is a “social diagram” that reinforces the structure of the nuclear family.<sup>59</sup>



Redrawing of Henry Roberts's Model Dwelling Unit Plans. Drawn by the author, adapted from Henry Roberts, *The Dwellings of the Laboring Classes, Their Arrangement and Construction*, Revised and Augmented Edition (London: Society for Improving the Condition of the Laboring Classes, 1867 [1851]), 88, 89, 91, 100, 104, 109, 121.

By tracing the evolution of Roberts's designs, we have observed several tendencies. Private spaces were increasingly allocated for individuals through the subdivision of rooms and the distribution of services and utilities. Access into the apartments became more isolated and less communal. Floor plans were designed to be repeatable across levels, eliminating differences in unit plans. Unit designs that were too unique were abandoned in later schemes, producing more regular unit plans that were more adaptable. This adaptability is key for our understanding of the model dwellings as a “type” rather than a “model.” While Roberts began his career designing housing for single workers and widowers, eventually, the main group of people he would design for would be the nuclear family. As such, Roberts's success in typological design came about by reducing the large variety of living arrangements and inhabitants into those suited for the nuclear family through abstraction.

<sup>57</sup> See Evans, “Rookeries and Model Dwellings,” 25–35.

<sup>58</sup> Aureli and Giudici, “Familiar Horror,” 125.

<sup>59</sup> Giudici, “Counter-planning from the kitchen: for a feminist critique of type,” 1205.

## SEPARATION AND PRIVACY: BUILDING MORAL CHARACTER AND INVESTMENT IN THE HOME

Analyzing his designs, we have observed Roberts's occupation with the separation and privacy of the housing unit. This surely stems in part from the epidemiological concerns of the time. Separation, ventilation, and drainage ensured that disease could be isolated and prevented. However, I would like to put forward two other reasons for this obsession with separation and privacy of the home. The first is related to the contemporary conflation of physical health with moral health. It was believed that the separation and privacy within the housing unit could produce a family with moral character. Roberts was concerned with the enclosures within the house precisely to produce this "well-ordered family." The second reason was to provide an object for investment in the "home."<sup>60</sup> Through the investment of time and money, the house could eliminate spending on idle pursuits and raise workers out of poverty. In both cases, the elimination of idleness and the encouragement of industriousness—inside and outside the house—were the objectives.

The conflation of physical health with moral health was common in the nineteenth century.<sup>61</sup> Roberts believed that the conditions of the dwelling contributed directly to its inhabitants' moral and spiritual conditions. Roberts believed that this was particularly true for the working class.<sup>62</sup> In his writings, he constantly connected the health and comfort of laborers. For example, Roberts thought that damp homes would lead to "mental depression and bodily feebleness" that would "excite a craving for intoxicating drink."<sup>63</sup> This physical suffering and the lack of cleanliness would lead laborers to the beer or spirit shop, stimulating "their enfeebled energies" and encouraging the "craving which is produced by the want of pure air."<sup>64</sup>

To have a healthy home did not mean just having one that was well-ventilated but one that was private and separated from that of others. As mentioned before, this would prevent the spread of disease. In addition, it would help separate families and genders to avoid immoral actions from taking place. The layout of the house was assumed to be a "mapping" of the moral condition of the family.<sup>65</sup> As Robin Evans argued in "Rookeries and Model Dwellings," the link between overcrowding and the moral conditions of the laboring classes was hard to prove for reformers.<sup>66</sup> However, the mixing of sexes within crowded rooms of rookeries and lodging houses was an easy way to demonstrate the immorality taking place in houses without gendered and functional partitions—the multiplicity of uses and activities in these rooms made every moment of life public and familiar.

The privacy of the family and separation from others is also connected to the conceptualization of the house as an object for the investment of time and money. Families could invest in their houses if they were separated from others. Roberts was a strong advocate for home ownership, arguing that property would be "stimulant to forethought and general good conduct."<sup>67</sup> In *Healthy Dwellings and Prevailing Sanitary Defects in the Homes of the Working Classes* (1861), Roberts highlighted a conversation with Professor Beck of Harvard College, who described an encounter with a servant from Ireland. The professor described to Roberts how the servant was going to abandon his wife and children. However, after the Professor offered to give him an advance to purchase land and build a home, he turned over a new leaf and became industrious and thrifty.<sup>68</sup>

60 Roberts begins to use "home" rather than "house" in his later writings. See Roberts, *Healthy Dwellings, and Prevailing Sanitary Defects in the Homes of the Working Classes*, 42.

61 Evans, "Rookeries and Model Dwellings."

62 Roberts, *Healthy Dwellings, and Prevailing Sanitary Defects in the Homes of the Working Classes*, 3.

63 Roberts, *The Essentials of a Healthy Dwelling*, 6.

64 Roberts, *Healthy Dwellings, and Prevailing Sanitary Defects in the Homes of the Working Classes*, 29–30.

65 Evans, "Rookeries and Model Dwellings," 27.

66 Ibid, 30–31.

67 Roberts, *The Essentials of a Healthy Dwelling*, 24.

68 Roberts, *Healthy Dwellings, and Prevailing Sanitary Defects in the Homes of the Working Classes*, 42.

This story established the man as the sole breadwinner and the house as a site for the investment of time and money.

Even for those who could only afford to rent, Roberts believed that investment in the house was important for the morality of the laboring classes. Instead of spending their wages on alcohol, Roberts encouraged workers to pass their money to their wives. The wives would in turn improve the comfort of the house and turn it into a “happy home,” one that would be more “attractive” than the “beer-shop or the public-house.”<sup>69</sup> This practice would inculcate values of industry, economy, and cleanliness in the working class. These values were essential for Roberts, as he believed that “a sober, industrious, and cleanly couple” would gain respectability despite being poor while the drunkard, spendthrift, and gamblers will “convert a palace into a scene of discomfort and misery.”<sup>70</sup> Roberts argued that these industrious habits would remedy evils and provide domestic happiness.

Both the husband and the wife had parts to play. For Roberts, the house was a gendered space and so was work. The husband would engage in wage labor to provide shelter and subsistence for the family while the wife would maintain the comfort and cleanliness of the household. When discussing the rents that needed to be paid, Roberts would address the “laborer and his family.”<sup>71</sup> Roberts’s model highlighted the importance of the husband’s financial investment into the house and established the domestic interior as the workplace of the working-class housewife.<sup>72</sup> He emphasized the “practical duties” of the wives of laborers, that they should be “keeper[s]” at home, attending household chores and childcare. Roberts held this to be of the utmost importance. Without this, he believed that even a healthy and moral condition would still succumb to problems. The physical and moral health of the family was dependent on domestic labor and investment.<sup>73</sup>

#### TYPOLOGICAL DESIGN AND THE LEGACY OF HENRY ROBERTS

Using the model dwellings of Henry Roberts, I hoped to show how typological ideas can play out in the evolution of one’s career. His designs were increasingly marked by a dedication to privacy and separation as well as a “moral” concern for the spatial organization of the nuclear family. They were intricately linked with his beliefs about how the family should operate and what the house should mean for the working class. As such, his designs celebrated domestic labor and investment.

Roberts’s designs and writings about model dwellings were extremely influential in the design of working-class housing during his time. The Model Dwellings for Four Families was exhibited in the Great Exhibition of 1851. Thereafter, the design was used in Cowley Gardens, Stepney, Fenelon Place, Kensington, Hertford, and near Abbot’s Langley.<sup>74</sup> The description of the Model Houses was published by *The Builder*, a significant architectural journal of the time.<sup>75</sup> Letters commending the designs came from many European countries.<sup>76</sup> Multiple editions of *The Dwellings of the Laboring Classes* were published and circulated.

Today, however, his views—and designs—are arguably patriarchal and conservative. Yet, the strict separation of rooms according to function continues to feel ubiquitous in housing design, particularly in that of

69 Henry Roberts, *Home Reform* (London: Society for Improving the Condition of the Laboring Classes, 1852), 5–6.

70 *Ibid.*, 4.

71 Roberts, *The Essentials of a Healthy Dwelling*, 24–25.

72 Aureli and Giudici, “Familiar Horror,” 126.

73 Roberts, *Healthy Dwellings, and Prevailing Sanitary Defects in the Homes of the Working Classes*, 47.

74 Curl, *The Life and Work of Henry Roberts*, 103.

75 *The Builder*, Vol IX, 1851, 311–2, 343.

76 Curl, *The Life and Work of Henry Roberts*, 105.

public and social housing.<sup>77</sup> The model dwellings are a clear demonstration of the impact of typological design in Roberts's work. By designing a type that can be applied in a generic context, he was able to influence the design of nuclear family housing, resulting in the spread of his highly paternalistic approach. As such, Roberts can be seen as an important case study for architects even though his intentions and legacy may not be altogether positive.

As architects today, we can apply the same mode of typological thinking to our design processes and projects. Rather than imagining projects as completely site-specific and solitary, it is essential that we also conceptualize them as types that can go beyond the physical manifestation of the actual building. By engaging in this method of designing, architects may redefine current modes of living and provide types infused with different ideals that depart from the cold profit-driven goals of capitalism. At the same time, Roberts's example shows how we may also benefit from being closely aware of practical and material considerations and wary of "ideal" solutions. Furthermore, Roberts demonstrates that this method is cumulative, relying on previous projects or other precedents. In contrast to the rigid model, typological design provides the basis for further design and variation to happen. Aside from the practical applications of type, the case of Henry Roberts highlights the importance of reading the spatial organization of buildings and understanding "type" as an architectural concept.<sup>78</sup> While one must concede that there are a variety of factors that determine whether a project gets built or if an idea is able to gain traction, architects must not shirk away from the disciplinary tools at our disposal and the lessons of history.

<sup>77</sup> Giudici, "Counter-planning from the kitchen: for a feminist critique of type," 1205.

<sup>78</sup> Christopher C. M. Lee has shown how the analysis of the "deep structure" of type is important for the autonomy of the discipline while also being a useful method for design. See Christopher C. M. Lee, "The Deep Structure of Type: The Construction of a Common Knowledge in Durand's Method" in *The City as a Project*, edited by Pier Vittorio Aureli (Berlin: Ruby Press, 2013), 170–212. See also Rafael Moneo, "On Typology," *Oppositions* 13 (1978).

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