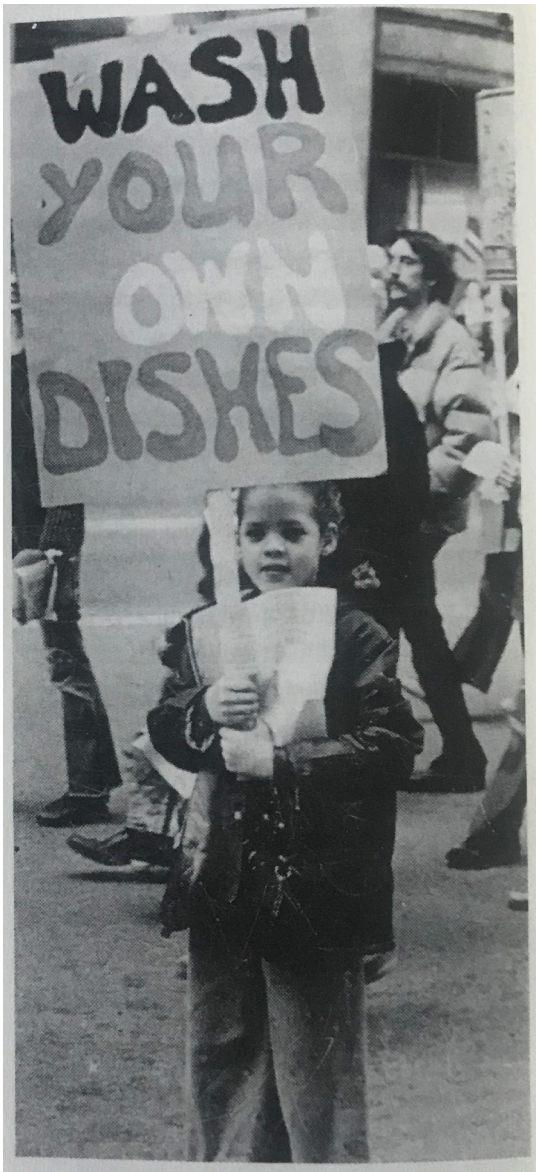


Housework? he said, Housework? *Oh my god how trivial can you get. A paper on housework.*
— Husband of feminist theoretician, 1970

Is our housekeeping sacred and honorable? Does it raise and inspire us, or does it cripple us?
— Ralph Waldo Emerson

ULWC: Exiting The Domestic Factory

From the 'houses' of Chicago House and mothers of vogue; to the tribes of rave; and on to the rent parties of the Harlem Renaissance; nightlife communities have long since challenged what a family is and how our domestic spaces may be inhabited as sites of labour, reproduction, intimacy, violence, pleasure and escape.

Unleashing the full potentials of these alternative kinship forms appears more relevant now than ever. Responding to a climate wherein right-wing valorisations of family life have conjoined with the intensified burdens of our domestic realities under pandemic conditions, a new cycle of the ULWC begins: Exiting the Domestic Factory.

Co-organized by Samantha Lippett, the cycle will broadly explore an anti-work politics of leisure and rest from the standpoint of domesticity, caring labour, and reproduction. Running parallel to this cycle, a series of mixtapes, gatherings and parties will unfold, organised by Deuxnoms.

Family abolitionism meets an Autonomist anti-work politics – on dancefloors and urban gardens; in communes, flats and district community centres.

ULWC Feast: A life without housework?

The ULWC Feast will take the form of a potluck dinner in the watermill, inviting you to bring a favourite quarantine dish you enjoyed during lockdown to be shared communally.

The ULWC will cook with some local goods and guide conversation about our changing relationship to domestic space under pandemic conditions. As we dine, a text about communal kitchens and feminist collectives will be shared from the inspirational book 'The Grand Domestic Revolution' (1981) that will frame stories about revolutionary nightlife communities, feminist communes and queer collectives that have attempted to transform domestic space and the normative family values too often associated with it.

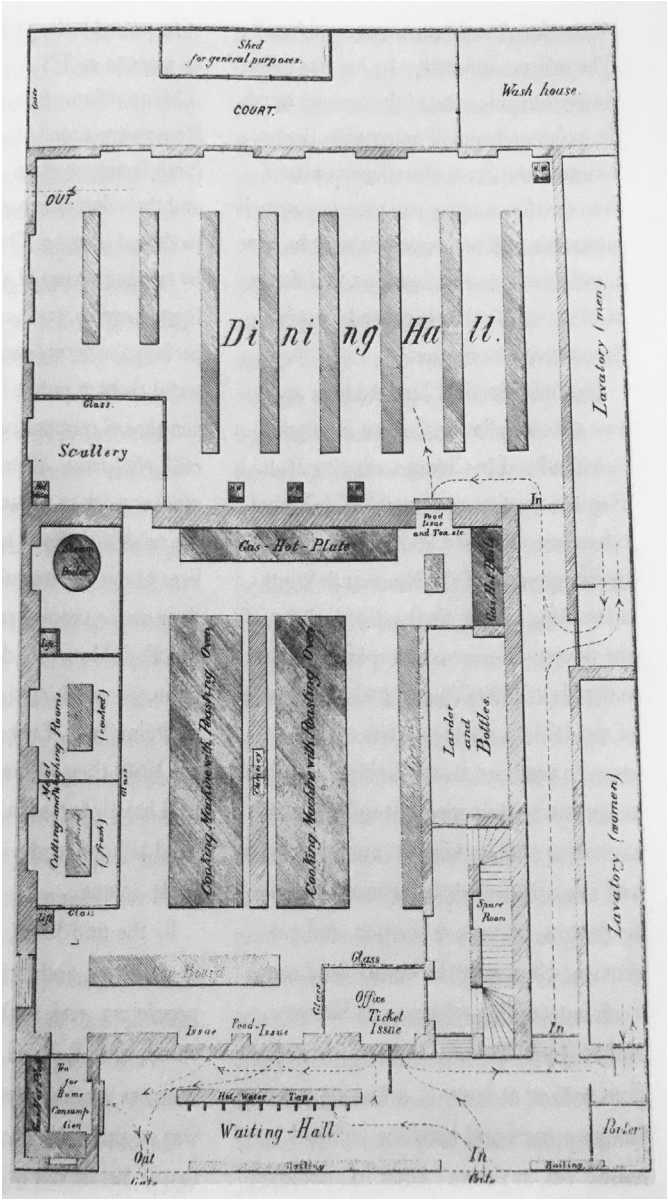
Text excerpts are taken from Dolores Hayden's 'The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities' (1981); which reveals the innovative plans and visionary strategies of a group of American feminists whose leaders included Melusina Fay Peirce, Mary Livermore, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman campaigned against women's isolation in the home and confinement to domestic life as the basic cause of their unequal position in society. These persistent women developed the theory and practice of what Hayden calls "material feminism" in pursuit of economic independence and social equality. The material feminists' ambitious goals of socialized housework and child care meant revolutionizing the American home and creating community services. They raised fundamental questions about the relationship of men, women, and children in industrial society.

“Public Kitchens, Social Settlements, and the Cooperative Ideal”

The excitement about public kitchens centered on two new professional fields dominated by women, home economics and social work, which came into being between 1887 and 1910. Together these two fields channelled the energies of many newly educated American women into the reform projects of the Progressive Era, and had a profound influence on American homes and families, especially working class and immigrant families. These 152 Widening Circles of Reform women pioneered the use of applied natural science and social science to analyze the problems of urban life; their subject matter ranged over chemistry, medicine, law, architecture, sociology, and economics, specializations in which many of them were originally trained. They stressed women’s collective attempts to improve the public environment and the domestic lives of ordinary people, and cooperative housekeeping was a familiar concept to them.

“We all became acquainted with the ideal picture in the once famous ‘Looking Backward’ of Edward Bellamy,” recalled Mary Hinman Abel, a noted home economist: “ . . . instead of fifty incompetent buyers at retail, one efficient buyer at wholesale; a chef . . . master of his art, and also of the new knowledge in nutrition now available; one kitchen fire instead of fifty; . . . the peripatetic housemaid and all other workers responsible to a bureau; the house heated from a central station, where a competent engineer shall extract from each pound of coal all the heat it should yield.” During the two decades after Bellamy’s novel appeared in 1888, the new generation of professional women like Abel who were engaged in home economics and social settlement work broadened the definition of cooperative housekeeping created by earlier material feminists and utopian novelists. As specialists in nutrition, sanitation, and social welfare, they were the embodiment of an earlier generation’s call for experts to deal with domestic life, yet when they examined the domestic world in terms of their new specialties, they eventually redefined “cooperative housekeeping” in favor of “social housekeeping” and altered the feminist and socialist thrust of earlier theories.

Democracy and scientific standards for the whole society became their slogans, as opposed to Melusina Fay Peirce’s call for economic and psychological self-determination for women, or Edward Bellamy’s prophecy of evolutionary socialism. The choice of constituencies, the design of experiments, and the arguments in favor of collective domesticity all shifted to reflect a serious concern for poor urban immigrants. The new professionals shared the earlier reformers’ commitment to the private home, but they wished to create municipal facilities and services, rather than neighbors’ cooperatives, to complement the home. They believed that such services were compatible with a democratic, capitalist society. They saw domestic issues as public issues and domestic skills as public skills: thus was born the concept of “women’s public work for the home,” undertaken by determined women reformers in corrupt, filthy American industrial cities.



"Homes without Kitchens and Towns without Housework"

Charlotte Perkins Gilman popularized the ideal of efficient, collective kitchens, laundries, and child care centers which removed women's traditional tasks from the private home. The organizers of dining clubs and cooked food delivery services, who attempted to carry these ideas out in practice represent one group of reformers who came under Gilman's broad influence. Architects and urban planners are another.

Like the organizers of dining clubs and cooked food services, the architects and urban planners who became interested in socializing domestic work had to deal with economic, social, and physical reorganization. What economic arrangements were necessary to build housing designed for greater sharing of domestic tasks? Could new household services be provided within a landlord-tenant relationship, on a commercial basis? Or was it necessary for resldents to control the ownership of their own housing collectively in order for them to control the reorganization and cost of domestic work? Another set of related questions concerned the design of the housing itself. On what scale should designers attempt to organize housing units for socialized domestic work? A few families? Or a few dozen families? Or a few hundred? Or a few thousand?

“Community Kitchens and Cooked Food Services”

A future without housework? An impatient husband, an ex-senator, challenged the ingenuity of the local women’s group, by complaining about his wife: “She is always cooking, or has just cooked, or is just going to cook, or is too tired from cooking. If there is a way out of this, with something to eat still in sight, for Heaven’s sake, tell us!”

His ultimatum was debated in a long session among women in one of the hot, formal parlors and argued out at a larger meeting of near neighbors, with almost sixty men, women, and children present. A large white clapboard house, with broad verandas on two sides, shaded by tall oaks, was rented. Horses and wagons, loaded with dining room tables and chairs, converged on the rented house and stopped near the broad porch. On the porch, the women drew lots, and one by one, the tables were carried inside. The winners placed their tables next to the tall windows in the library and dining room on the ground floor. The losers put theirs in the centers of these rooms. The women brought tablecloths, napkins, and silverware from home in boxes and hampers. Muslin curtains were hung at every window. As the tables were set, a few women added jars of homemade relishes, pickles, peach and strawberry preserves, mint jellies. The rooms were readied for sixty people to dine.

A manager, two cooks, two waitresses, and a dishwasher were busy in the kitchen, preparing for the evening meal of steak, stuffed baked potatoes, baked beans, brown bread, lettuce salad, blanc-mange with orange sauce, and coffee. The member families, having paid $3.00 per adult per week, for three meals per day (or half that price for children under seven), enjoyed that meal. Said one husband, “Never to hear a word about the servants that have just left, or are here, or are coming tomorrow — perhaps! . . . We’re in Missouri and we’re ready for anything.” Said another husband, at first a skeptic about this “Home for the Help-less,” “I’m down as a life-member, let me tell you right now! The meals may be plain but they are balanced. The quality makes up for any amount of frills and trimming.”

After a month of successful operation, as autumn drew in, a reading room was furnished. Books, magazines, lamps, and upholstered chairs appeared to make a comfortable indoor sitting area. If the men were satisfied by the Cooperative Kitchen, the women were greatly relieved. Probably some of them took over their old dining rooms at home and turned them into proper office spaces, for handling the massive correspondence an effective suffrage group required. Others spent more time with their children; one learned to drive a car; one did a bit of writing. The two single schoolteachers, who belonged to the Cooperative Kitchen and lived there too, were delighted to be treated as adult women, as social equals, despite their lack of spouses and households of their own. Their rooms cost $7.50 per month, their food, $12.00, but at last they were free from being patronized as somebody’s “boarders.”

Even the hard-pressed workers in the Cooperative Kitchen were a little better off than before. Rather than living in affluent households where one servant did everything, six of them shared work in the kitchen.

20th Century Food Co., New Haven, 1900

Now let the cook lady strike; who cares? All I have to do is to step to the telephone or drop a post card and order dinner, have it served hot at the door, well cooked and of excellent variety, for less money than you could do it yourself, to say nothing about wear and tear of nerves. It is emancipation, I say, sing the long meter doxology, be thankful there are those to blaze a trail out of the wilderness and lead the people into the promised land of delightful housekeeping.
— Clergyman in New Haven, patron of a cooked food service, 1901

We're in *Missouri, and we're ready for anything.*
— Participant in a neighborhood Cooperative Kitchen, 1907

As the Carthage experiment indicates, while home economists lectured about scientific cooking, novelists fantasized about kitchenless houses, and feminists exposed the weaknesses of the traditional home, many pragmatic middle-class women organized various types of community kitchens to provide food for their families. Two pioneers in the movement for community kitchens explained, "Here is a chance for a woman gifted with common sense, some business ability, and a fair knowledge of cookery, not only to release or relieve other women, but to add to the family income or even to earn her livelihood."

"Community Dining Clubs"

An editor of the Independent described numerous dining clubs all over the country in 1902: "Many of these have been run successfully for a number of years; and in some cases community dining halls have been built expressly for the purpose. The cooperative kitchens are very diverse in form. The simplest and most flexible type is where a dozen families club together and hire a cook and one or two assistants, and rent a kitchen and dining rooms, either buying or contributing the kitchen utensils and table ware." A club in Warren, Ohio, stands out as the most positive experience of community dining, since it continued for over two decades. Similar to the Cooperative Kitchen in Carthage, it involved men actively, and included women with important commitments outside family life.

These enterprises and similar community dining clubs founded in Jacksonville, Illinois; Junction City, Kansas; Decatur, Illinois; Sioux City, Iowa; and Longwood, Illinois, to mention a few other towns, seem to confirm Melusina Fay Peirce's prediction, made in 1869, that cooperative housekeeping would enjoy its greatest successes in small, midwestem towns where women were used to doing their own work and class distinctions were not rigidly enforced. Of the thirteen such clubs for which membership figures are available, none included less than five, or more than twenty families, with the average around twelve to fifteen. Many were near neighbors. Only one is known to have been affluent enough to build a community dining hall before establishing its operations; most rented or purchased houses to use for cooking and dining. None charged less than $2.50 per week for all meals for an adult; and no pre-World War I fees exceeded $4.50.

The rules of the Junction City Bellamy Club, in Kansas, which lasted for five years, suggest the friendly common sense necessary to sustain such a neighborly endeavor:

It shall be the duty of members to assist and encourage the officers in the conduct of the club.

1. By remembering to be reasonable in their requirements, bearing in mind that the weekly dues are small and that judgment and economy are necessary to make the receipts equal to the expenditures.

2. By never forgetting that they are not in a boarding house carried on for the purpose of gain, but are members of a mutual cooperative society, whose members give their time and energy, to the work without any recompense except that shared by all, viz., the successful working of the club.

3. Members should consider it a duty to make known any shortcomings of servants or fare to the Vice-president, whose business it is to hear and endeavor to redress grievances; and refrain from inflicting them on their fellow members.

4. It shall be the imperative duty of members to speak as well of the club as they would of their own families; failing to do this they should withdraw, as no members are desired who are dissatisfied.

10.2 Pittsburg [sic] Dinner Delivery Company, horse and wagon, boy carrying heat retainer, 1903. Courtesy Western Pennsylvania Historical Society.

"Cooked Food Delivery Services"

In many urban centers and some small towns, cooked food delivery services were preferred to community dining clubs. At first they delivered food by horse and wagon, and then automobiles increased the speed of food delivery after 1910. Usually slightly more expensive than community dining clubs, they had regular subscribers. In addition, often they were patronized on a temporary basis by families whose domestic arrangements were dislocated by travel, illness, or lack of servants. These cooked food delivery services attempted to offer a well-balanced meal of several courses, which could be consumed in the privacy of the family dining room. The food service was equal to that offered by a good residential hotel, where inhabitants could order meals sent to their apartments from the kitchen, but it was far more flexible and without the social stigma of apartment hotel life. These "meals on wheels" allowed customers to continue to live in their own homes with none of the unsettling difficulties that shopping and cooking, or hiring and supervising servants offered. About one quarter of the cooked food delivery services became financially successful enough to offer additional services, such as laundry, maid service, child care, catering for special occasions, or school lunches. Only two of the twenty services were actually run by cooperating housewives, although nine were organized as consumers' cooperatives requiring membership, and run by home economists. Nine were run by entrepreneurs.

The most participatory of all of these food delivery experiments was established by eight housewives, in the town of Palo Alto, California, for two years during the mid-1890s. The women shared meal planning and buying of supplies. A Chinese cook prepared the food; a Stanford student was hired to deliver it; nursery maids and housemaids were also hired in common. This experiment may even have had the blessing of Leland Stanford, since he was reported in the Woman's Journal in 1887 as endorsing cooperative housekeeping: "One of the difficulties in the employment of women arises from their domestic duties; but co-operation would provide for a general utilization of their capacities. . . ." While small experiments with four to eight families might succeed, just as the neighborhood dining clubs had, larger groups had more problems. A Philadelphia matron criticized a group delivering food in one neighborhood: "Would you like to think that you were eating for your dinner, the same things that everybody else in the square was eating?" Although nine cooperating families living in one square in Philadelphia had relatively few problems in transporting cooked food to adjoining houses, groups which drew their members from a wider radius had to face great logistical difficulties.

“Communitarian Socialism and Domestic Feminism”

The socialization of domestic labor provided an obvious justification for better design and equipment: fifty private families might need fifty kitchens and fifty stoves, but a communal family, with one large kitchen and one large stove, had the resources to invest in additional, more sophisticated labor-saving devices. Communitarian socialists took pride in providing themselves with the latest in heating, lighting, and sanitation devices, designed to ensure the health of their members and lighten domestic labor. And what they didn't acquire, the women and men of the group might invent.

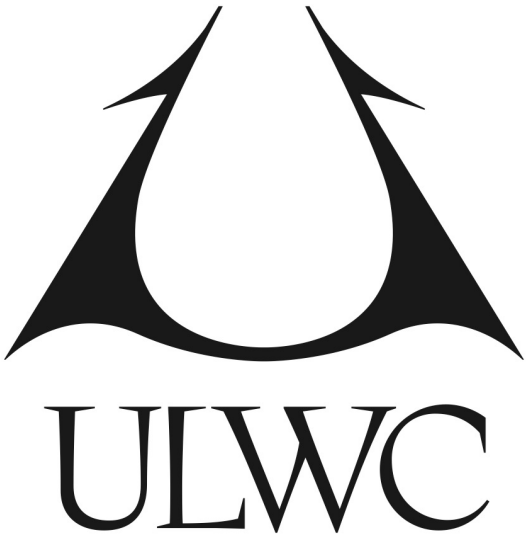
The Harmony Society devised special insulation and ventilation for its houses. The Oneida Perfectionists installed gas light, steam baths, and steam heat in their communal Mansion House in the 1860s. This last comfort caused almost hysterical excitement: “Good-bye wood sheds, good-bye stoves, good-bye coal scuttles, good-bye pokers, good-bye ash sifters, good-bye stove dust, and good-bye coal gas. Hail to the one fire millennium!” Yet, significantly, the Oneidans retained one wood-burning stove in a small room they called their “Pocket Kitchen.” The warmth of a direct heat source in a small space was appreciated as having nurturing qualities which couldn't be improved upon. Here was the community medicine chest and a place for telling one's troubles.

Lists of domestic inventions produced by members of various communities are equaled only by the lists of inventions in their other industries. The Shakers have to their credit an improved washing ma¬chine; the common clothespin; a double rolling pin for faster pastry making; a conical stove to heat flatirons; the flat broom; removable window sash, for easy washing; a window-sash balance; a round oven for more even cooking; a rotating oven shelf for removing items more easily; a butter worker; a cheese press; a pea sheller; an apple peeler; and an apple parer which quartered and cored the fruit. Members of the Oneida Community produced a lazy-susan dining-table center, an improved mop wringer, an improved washing machine, and an institutional-scale potato peeler. (Their community policy was to rotate jobs every few months, so that skills learned in one community shop might be the source of inventions to speed another sort of task.)

Inventiveness also extended to developing equipment and spaces for child care. For their kindergartens, the Amana Inspirationists built large cradles which could hold as many as six children. Other communes had specially designed furniture at child scale, a novelty not to be found in most nineteenth-century homes. One early twentieth-century commune, the Bru¬ derhof, still supports itself today by manufacturing Community Playthings. Outdoor spaces might be designed with children in mind as well: the Oneida Community had an extensive landscaped playspace; the Shakers created model farms and gardens for their boys and girls.

If the first goal of many communitarians was efficiency in domestic industries, the second was ending the confinement of women to domestic work. In most of the experiments described, cooking, cleaning, and child care remained women's work, despite some limited participation by men. But, because of the division and specialization of labor and the introduction of labor-saving devices, women's overall hours of work were limited. Rather than being on call day and night, like the average wife and mother, many communitarian women had leisure to develop their other interests such as reading, writing, participating in musical or theatrical performances, developing friendships, enjoying amorous relationships. This gave them a degree of freedom unimaginable in the larger society, especially if their community provided day care facilities.

Although most experiments managed to limit the hours of work for women, domestic work was not always as highly paid as other communal industries, and women were not always encouraged to enter other areas of work. The celibate Shakers kept all areas of work restricted by sex; men and women never worked together. Other communes, like Oneida and the North American Phalanx, made gestures toward encouraging women to enter administration, factory work, and other nondomestic jobs. Consciousness of the problems of socialization for women's work was high at Oneida, where young girls were told to get rid of their dolls lest they learn to be mothers before they had learned to be persons. Consciousness was not enough, however, for although some Oneida women worked in the community factory, most worked in domestic industries, apparently by choice, and the situation was the same in most other experimental communities, especially those which encouraged women to perfect domestic skills. One old photograph of a sewing class at a Fourierist community showing only young women in attendance suggests the kind of community pressures which countered some groups' official proclamations on women's work.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