

**Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "Making A Change"– a
short story encourages reform**

A Casebook

ENGL 129 Literature and Diversity

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“If I can learn to write good stories it will be a powerful addition to my armory.”

(Gilman qtd. in Allen 145)

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was one of the leading feminist reformers of the nineteenth century. Today, she is mostly remembered for her short stories and novels; yet, during her lifetime she was primarily known for her social and political writings as well as her lectures (Rudd, Gough ix). In fact, Gilman employed various media such as speech, drawing, singing, writing, clowning, and even cajoling to emphasize and support her reformation ideas (Allen 105). About her most famous story “The Yellow Wallpaper” she claimed that “[she] wrote it to preach. If it is literature that just happened” (qtd. in Allen 145). This seems to have been the case for most of her work since everything she did appeared to serve a solely educational purpose. Especially her fictional stories are metaphors for real life and her was reform ideas (Rudd, Gough x). She strove to ease the life of women by deconstructing the limitations of domestic spaces through architectural reform and the establishment of community services. Thus, with didactic stories like “Making a Change” she hoped to inspire women to transgress the boundaries between the private and the public sphere and eventually enter the work force. While her stories certainly supported her reformative ideas by nurturing women’s and men’s imagination and enabling them to visualize the future she had envisioned, they are also questionable. Revealing flaws in the logic of her reform ideas they prompt much criticism. Especially for modern audiences, her ideas seem less cohesive, since they, for instance, did not account for the lives of many marginalized women. Thus, while her fiction can be seen as supporting her reformist work and visualizing her ideas for her audiences, her stories also unveil flaws and problems.

In her work, Gilman often laments the negative effects of women’s refinement to the domestic sphere. She points to the injustices of the “sexual division of labor – to men the world,

to women the home – which was patently unfair to women” (Allen 66). Especially in the nineteenth century women were often expected to marry and afterwards take on the role of nurse, cook, manager of the home, janitor, and cleaner (Allen 66). To Gilman, the notion that “every girl should know how to cook” (Gilman 91) was very troublesome. Therefore, she fought to defy common stereotypes about women. Moreover, she realized that “the conventional home epitomized a sweatshop” (Allen 67) and women’s domestic labor was often too hard to bear, leading to stress and nervous breakdowns. Women’s work at home was not only exhausting to the mind, but also to women’s bodies and their nerves and many often suffered from “fatigue, ill health and [even] early death” (67). In “Making a Change”, for example, Julia Gordins struggles to fulfil her “duty to take care of [her child]” (Gilman Making a Change 67) and her “nerves [are] at the breaking point” (67). Like many other women who were confined to the home, Julia is incapable of handling the situation. Eventually, the hardships at home push her to attempt suicide (71). Thus, Gilman shows the devastating effects the domestic situation can have on women who are left alone with the duties imposed on them.

However, the domestic situation did not only negatively affect women, but also their families. In her speeches and non-fictional writing, Gilman often argued that American households were unevolved, since they were “isolated, unspecialized, wasteful, and unhealthy” (Allen 66). She claimed that defective homes and the lack of time and space for relaxation rendered “the relationship [between them] was subject to nettlesome irritation at all times” (Allen 72). Her fiction emphasizes this danger, for the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Gordins does not seem harmonious. With “deep inscrutable wells of angry light” (Gilman Making a Change 68), Julia ponders on their relationship. She feels misunderstood, since “he had not the faintest appreciation of her state of mind” (Gilman Making a Change 68). Furthermore, Frank’s “nerves were raw, too” (67) and he is

extremely relieved once he has “left the house behind him and entered his own world” (69). Moreover, the unevolved domestic sphere also harmed children and often deprived them of the most qualitative care and nurture (Allen 73). In fact, the reader is introduced to the story by the crying of little Albert (Gilman *Making a Change* 66). His mother does “not know of any” (66) way to make him stop and everyone is annoyed, stressed, and close to a nervous breakdown. By presenting domestic situation in a negative light, Gilman appeals to her readers and uses her story to reveal the negative effects traditional households have on everyone in the family.

Since Gilman not only realized the ability of the domestic environment to inflict harm on women and their families, but also saw the liberating potential within this sphere (Allen 57), she proposed to reform it. The title of her short story “*Making a Change*” not only alludes to the specific changes that the Gordins family makes in their life, but also to Gilman’s overall agenda to make profound changes in every home in America.. Making a change is the primary purpose of her domestic reforms. The story, in which her characters propose to “make a change” about half a dozen times, serves as an example for her innovative propositions. Gilman strives to “alter [...] sexual relationships, home life, motherhood and the economy” (Rowbotham) and uses her fictional work to support her cause. She educates her readers and emphasizes with her stories that restructuring the domestic sphere and women’s roles is the only way to successfully make a positive change.

Gilman proposed various ways to improve the negative implications the unevolved domestic situation had on women and their families, for instance, the architectural reform of homes and communalization of domestic tasks. Her drawings and blueprints are evidence for her intensive preoccupation with architecture and concepts of space. As a material feminist she “recognized the need to break down the isolation incurred through the gendered separation of public and private

sphere” (Gaudelius 111). Hence, she proposed architectural restructuring of homes as well as the relocation and “professionalization of [services such as] cooking, cleaning, and laundry work” (Gilman 95). Eliminating domestic spaces that were previously connected to burdensome chores like cooking in the kitchen, Gilman proposed the linkage of households to collective communities such as “Hull House and N. O. Nelson’s model village of Leclair, Missouri” (Gaudelius 122). While being not only concerned with the design of homes, she also paid much attention to financial aspects of housekeeping and was convinced that the costs of maintaining individual homes are much higher than those of collective communities. She found that the municipalization of household chores and the grouping of individual homes could significantly lower expenditures. Like the old and young Mrs. Gordins, she gave a lot of thought to her projects and did not fail to plan all the details according to her calculations. In “Making a Change” the old Mrs. Gordins states:

“I rent the upper flat, you see – it is forty dollars a month, same as ours – and pay Celia five dollars a week, and pay Dr. Holbrook downstairs the same for looking over my little ones every day. She helped me to get them, too. The mothers pay me three dollars a week each, and don’t have to keep a nursemaid. And I pay ten dollars a week board to Julia, and still have about ten of my own” (Gilman Making a Change 74)

This passage shows that the plan of the Gordins’ women was carefully thought out and very detailed. Gilman emphasizes the importance of planning in order to succeed with one’s reform and shows that women too are capable of conducting business outside the home. She further shows that her reforms had the ability to profoundly change women’s lives and “have [their] health

improve rapidly and steadily, the delicate pink come back to [their] cheeks, the soft light to [their] eyes” again (Gilman *Making a Change* 72).

In proposing common services and the restructuring of the domestic sphere, Gilman also redefined the notion of motherhood. Unlike her contemporaries who believed in the “‘mother-woman’ and ‘the angel in the house’”, Gilman did not believe in these stereotypes (Golden 135). Instead, she openly opposed to these notions of motherhood and offered an alternative view in her fictional as well as non-fictional writings. While she too believed that “motherhood is a natural instinct” (Sabanci 110), she did not think that this automatically enabled women to take care of their children. Instead, she was convinced that a mother’s natural instinct was primarily emotional and that the ability to nurture and care for a child was not inherent to all women. Julia, for instance, is a loving and caring mother who spends “her days in unremitting devotion to [her son’s] needs” (Gilman *Making a Change* 67). However, she has not been bestowed with the gift of being able to care for a child; unlike her mother-in-law who “knows more about taking care of babies than [she will] ever learn” (68). This does not mean that she is a bad or unnatural mother. It simply emphasizes Gilman’s point that collective motherhood and professional child care would provide better education and nurture for children. She realizes the “need for a ‘new motherhood’” that separates emotions from qualification (Golden 136). A trained and experienced professional, like the old Mrs. Gordins who “has the real love for it” (Gilman *Making a Change* 68) is more profitable for the child’s wellbeing. Therefore, Gilman proposes the establishment of child-care centers that could serve twenty to thirty families each (Allen 112). In “*Making a Change*” Gilman envisions one such child-care center, run by the old Mrs. Gordins who “could take care of twenty [children like her grandson] – and enjoy it” (Gilman *Making a Change* 71). A whole flat, outside of women’s homes and thus separate from the domestic sphere, could be “turned into a convenient place for

many little ones to take their naps or to play in if the weather was bad” (74). Furthermore a “sunny roof-garden, [...] sand-pile and big, shallow, zinc-lined pool, [...] flowers and vines, [...] seesaws, swings and floor mattresses” (74) like the ones in Mrs. Gordins’s child care center would enable women from all over the neighborhood to be relieved of the burdens of domestic life and return to the work force.

Most of Gilman’s reform proposals mainly aim to liberate women and enable them to enter and work in the public sphere are honorable, but also problematic. By leaving their children in child care centers, many women were able to resume the professions they had before marriage and add to the family income. Hence, many women, like Julia Gordins “[gave] music lessons, just as [they] used to” (Gilman Making a Change 74) or worked as educators, nurses, and social workers”, in order to be more independent. In her writings, Gilman emphasizes that working women are not a threat and are not an “indication of a man’s inability to provide money for his family” (Sabanci 147). Yet, while Gilman’s aim to liberate and inspire women were revolutionary at the time, it still left them dependent on their husbands as main providers for the family. If women, like Julia who has “Mother’s ten to add to the house money, and twenty more of [her] own” (Gilman Making a Change 75) only earn a small portion of the family’s income, they have not yet reached equality. Furthermore, women in Gilman’s stories and the nineteenth century in general engaged in “work with essentially female characteristics” (Sabanci 195). Hence, they were still limited since the domestic, feminine activities were simply outsourced but still done by women. Although many women, like Julia, are “happy and well” after entering the work force (Gilman Making a Change 74), they are still confined to a feminine sphere, now located within the male public sphere. It is thus obvious that, although Gilman’s reforms were an important step towards equality for women in the workforce, they were not unproblematic.

Especially from today's point of view Gilman's reforms were rather limited and still conformed to certain stereotypes about female activities. Not demanding full equality for women and lacking attention to race and class, Gilman and her stories have thus faced much criticism. Examining her body of work from a modern standpoint reveals that it does not account for intersectionality among women's experiences and clearly privileges white upper and middle class women who could afford hiring professionals, servants, and companies to do their housework and child-care for them. Many of the people hired to relief white upper class and middle class women of the burdens of housework were "low-paid workers who were usually female and often nonwhite or immigrant" (Gaudelius 125). In "Making a Change" for instance, the Gordins family first employs Greta and later hires "an amazing French matron who came in by the day" (Gilman Making a Change 72). Moreover, many working class women did not have the luxury to stay at home and mend the house and children and, as a result, were not confronted with issues of being confined to the domestic sphere. Gilman seems to only speak to women of her own class and race and neglects to be more inclusive of minority groups. Therefore, her body of work has been highly criticized and rendered problematic.

Another point of criticism is that, although her stories convey a realist depiction of what life was like for women who stayed at home, Gilman's solutions to these problems often seem utopic. "How easily people [in her stories] could assert control over their lives" seems rather unreal and renders Gilman's stories less credible. Neither one of the Gordins women seem to encounter any problems in realizing their fantastic plan. Gilman does not account for possible difficulties women might face when making changes in their domestic lives. Furthermore, she fails to include all of her reform ideas in one work (Sabanci 264). This limits the realistic perception of her propositions that realizing all of her goals at once might be a difficult task. Thus, in "Making a

Change” she does not address her plans for kitchenless homes, nor does she elaborate on any other communal services except child care. Hence, in failing to be inclusive of all her reforms and in painting a metaphor that seems too good to be true, Gilman not only leaves room to critique for her stories but also what they exemplify, namely her reforms of domestic life in reality.

However, one should give Gilman some credit for imagining a better future for women, since even today not all of these goals and visions have been realized by feminist around the world. While some of her ideas “are still at the heart of much feminist debate” (Rudd Gough xv), her work has had a great influence on women’s lives and has caused gradual if not immediate changes in the structure of the home and the distribution of domestic tasks. “Every day-care center or fast-food franchise” relieves parents from the hard domestic labor that Gilman criticized in her work (Holtzkay). In fact, child-care centers, communal living, for example, the establishment of unified neighborhoods in various parts of the United States and Canada (Allen 175), and the inclusion of women in the work force have all become reality today. Thus, while her reforms certainly had flaws, her ideas are valid even today and her stories still function to educate and inspire her readers.

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· CHAPTER THREE ·

*Gilman's Attention to Domestic Architecture:
Her Fourfold Case against Prevailing
Household Design*



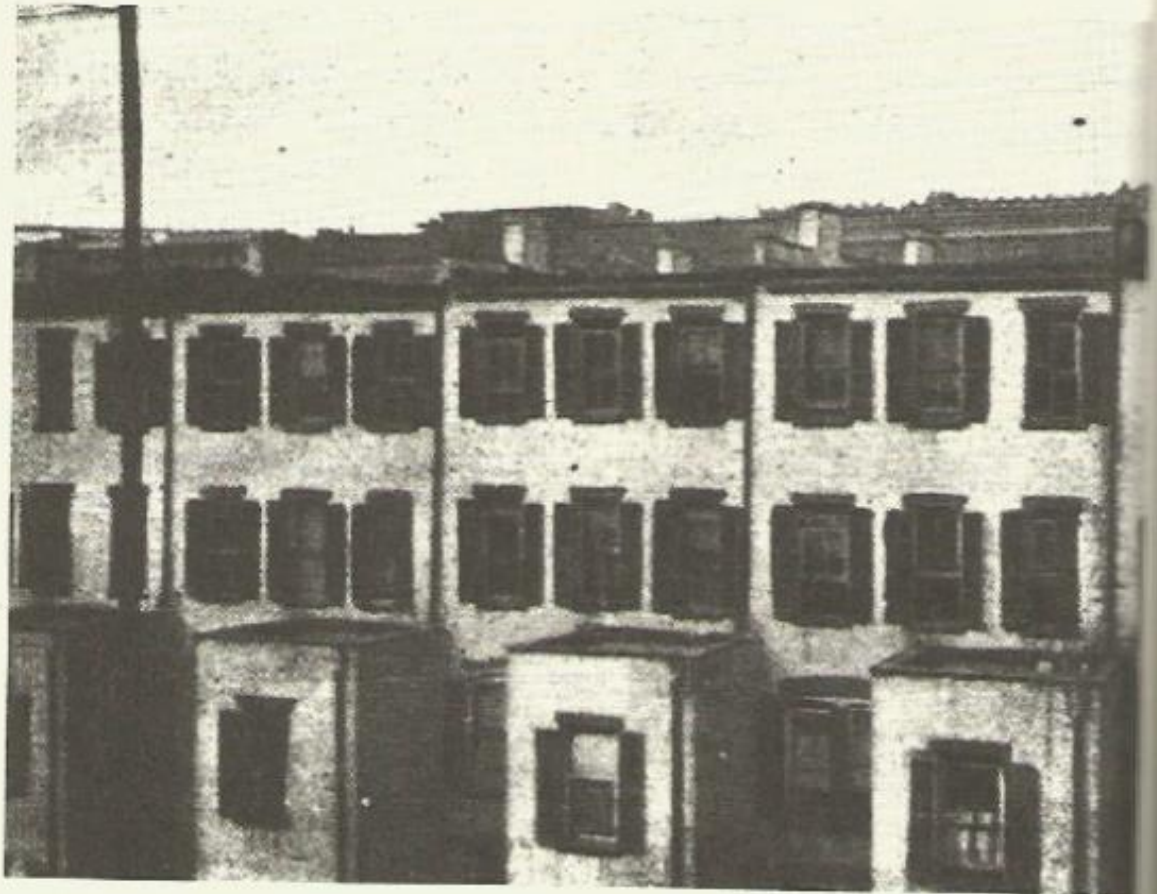
Are you content with work,—to toil alone,
To clean things dirty and to soil things clean;
To be a kitchen-maid, be called a queen,—
Queen of a cook-stove throne?

Are you content to reign in that small space—
A wooden palace and a yard-fenced land—
With other queens abundant on each hand,
Each fastened in her place?

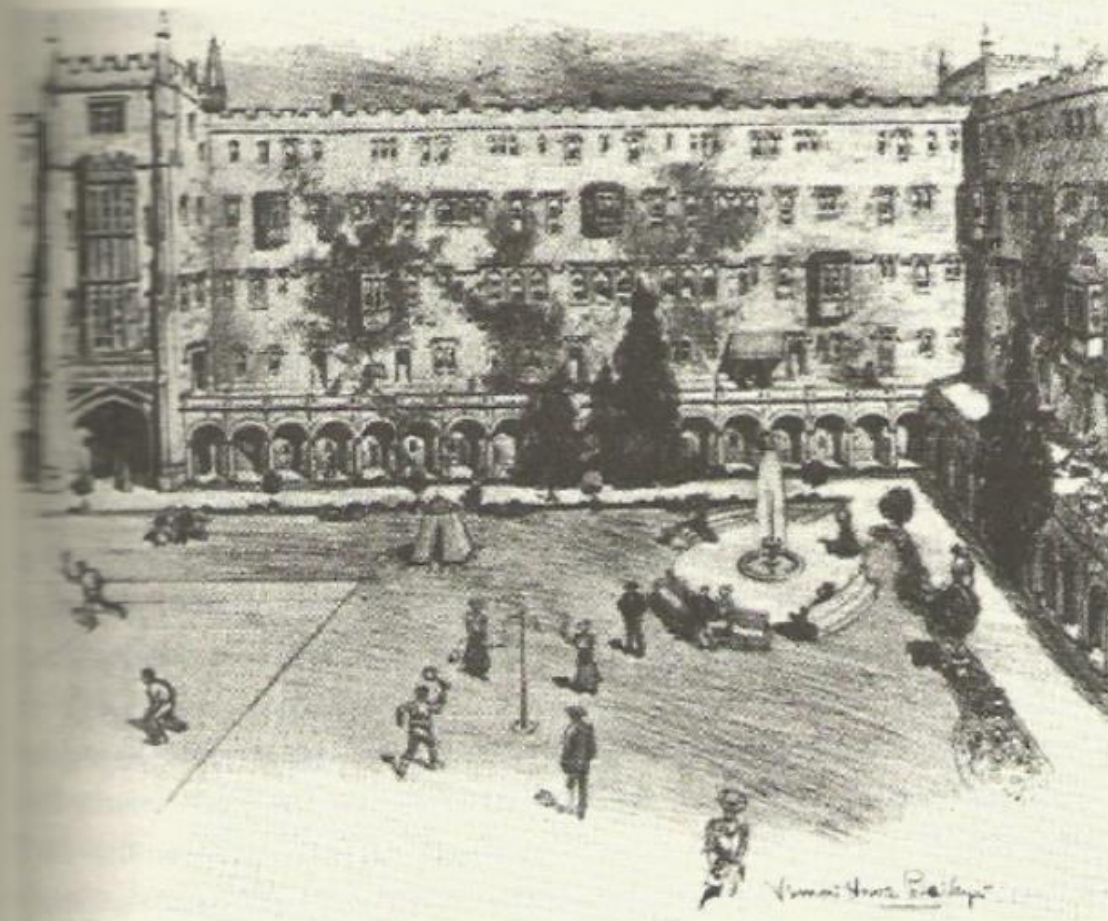
.....
What holds You? Ah, my dear, it is your throne,
Your paltry queenship in that narrow place,
Your antique labors, your restricted space,
Your working all alone!

“To the Young Wife”

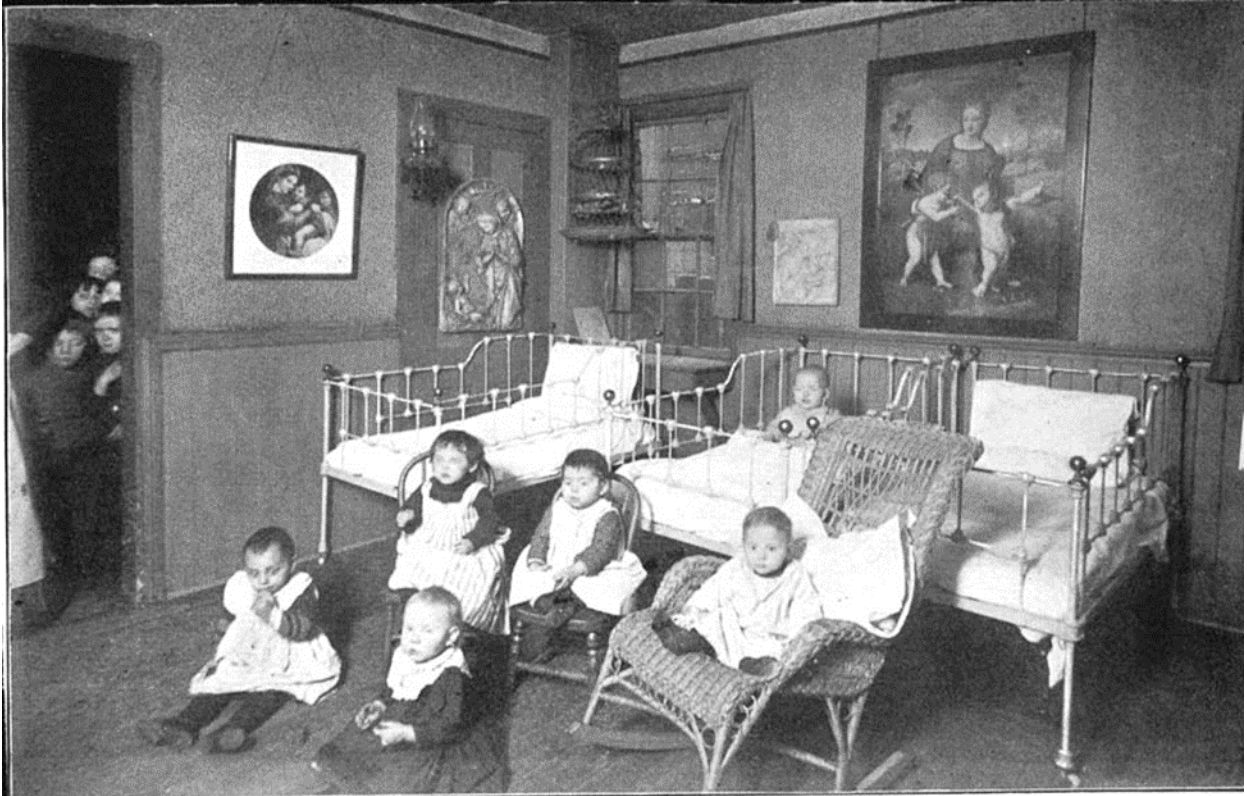
CHARLOTTE PERKINS STETSON



Contrasting designs illustrating strictly autonomous, redundant planning and the more progressive, integrated approach that Gilman advocated. She included these two photographs in "The Beauty of a Block," 1909.



Idealized rendering of "Central Court of the Proposed Unified City Block," drawn by Vernon Howe Bailey. Gilman featured it in her 1909 *Independent* article entitled "The Beauty of a Block."



Hull-House Nursery, ca. 1890s



A large, commercial-style kitchen serving a central dining room, crucial to Gilman's architectural program. Published as part of article by Gilman, "The Passing of the Home in Great American Cities," in *Cosmopolitan*, December 1904.

Now, how does the account compare?
By the domestic method:

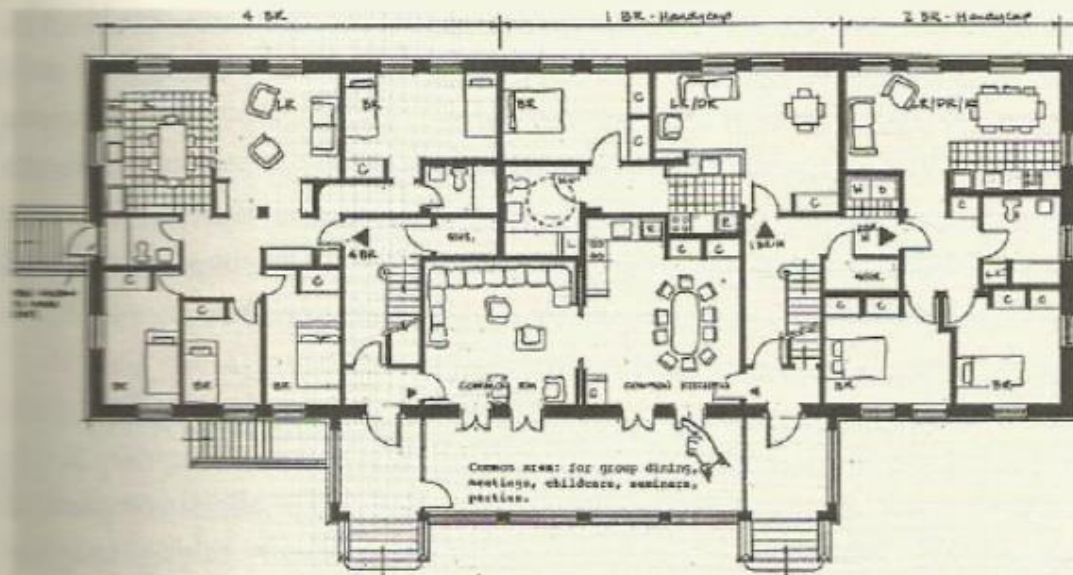
Rent	\$1,500
Food	1,664
Labor	960
Fuel and light.....	50
Interest and depreciation.....	50
	<hr/>
	\$4,224

This sum is paid for crowded houses full of ill-adjusted industries, for uncertain, low class labor, and constant care and worry.

By organized industry:

Rent	\$1,200
Food, served.....	785
Fuel and light.....	25
Laundry and cleaning.....	265
Child culture.....	550
Club dues.....	800
	<hr/>
	\$3,120

To demonstrate the superiority of combined housekeeping facilities, Gilman often offered comparative budgets suggesting that sharing would result in substantial economies to individual families. She included these particular figures in an early twentieth-century article entitled "Domestic Economy."



Proposed design for the rehabilitation of Greenpoint Hospital (Brooklyn, New York), to include thirty-seven units of housing for women and single parents.

Project of the National Congress of Neighborhood Women, Katrin Adam and Barbara Marks, architects. Intergenerational housing connecting community spaces, private dwellings, and shared domestic facilities has many benefits for people of all ages. Photograph of residents of St. Clair O'Connor Community, a project of the Mennonite Church in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Photo courtesy of the *Toronto Star*.