



Peter Brown

Working at home is a prevalent, if in most places little advertised, aspect of everyday life. In Houston, as these photographs show, home-based industry is more openly accommodated in the absence of zoning.

WORKING AT HOME

J. B. JACKSON

WHEN should we keep the place where we work separate from the place where we live? It depends very much on the kind of work. In the city, factories and heavy traffic make certain areas all but uninhabitable, and we protect residential neighborhoods from contact with industry by means of zoning. But in a small town or a village the problem is more complicated: we want to preserve the green, quiet atmosphere of our residential streets, yet we are reluctant to exclude families who depend on a home enterprise. I have neighbors who work in town all day and whose houses and front lawns are models of small-town domesticity. But I also have neighbors who operate a laundromat, and others who live above their machine shop. Their front yards are disheveled parking lots. Still, I enjoy doing business with them. They are near at hand and they are friendly.

What is at stake in this and similar instances is not so much a matter of aesthetics or property values as it is of how we define the home and its role in the community. That is a definition hard to come by. I thought I might find the answer in a publication called *Home: A Place in the World*.¹ It consisted of the proceedings of a conference held in 1990 that was attended by a number of social scientists, historians, architecture critics, and other authorities. In the words of the editor, the conference was designed to "explore the ideology of home, its meaning as a central idea, as well as the crises engendered by its loss in homelessness and exile, and by the experience of loss suffered in alienation." An impressive agenda!

In fact, the book opened my eyes to the complexity of a subject that I had thought I understood. What the speakers discussed, often with eloquence and learning, was the *idea* of home, home as an individual, sometimes solitary experience. The notion of being at home, for instance, was defined as "a mental or moral condition," and Georg Simmel was quoted to the effect that "home is an aspect of life and at the same time a special way of forming, reflecting and interrelating with the totality of life." I learned that home could be likened to a set of Emersonian conceptual concentric circles.

I also noted, to my surprise, that house or shelter actually had very little to do with home. There were disparaging references to the current use (or misuse) of "home" as the equivalent of "residence" — "the linguistic waste product of the real estate industry." Certainly the joys of returning to the homestead have often been exaggerated, but I was struck by the fascination that the concept of homelessness seemed to hold: no fewer than four speakers expatiated on what was termed "a somber and significant domain," and one speaker declared that the real alternative to homelessness was "not shelter but solidarity."

This outspoken hostility to the house as one aspect of home was puzzling. Some of it was clearly inspired by an urge to astonish, to shock; but I began to understand the attitude after reading in one of the papers a reference to home as a withdrawal into the safekeeping of our dwelling. "The cloister and the cell as home, places of meditation, and work are reflected in secular modernity by the idea

of the writer's home . . . to which one retires from the outside world or family, bed, and board of the rest of his house."

So the cat was at last out of the bag! Despite all the discourse about alienation and exile and the grandeur of homelessness (especially for the writer and thinker), home proved to be little more than an academic version of the middle-class American house, dedicated to privacy, leisure, and remoteness from the workaday world.

"Western culture," Yi-Fu Tuan has written, "encourages an intense awareness of self and, compared with other cultures, an exaggerated belief in the power and value of the individual. . . . This isolated, critical and self-conscious individual is a cultural artifact. We may well wonder at its history. Children, we know, do not feel or think thus, nor do nonliterate and tradition-bound peoples, nor did Europeans in earlier times."²

He noted that in the evolution of the European house, "more and more rooms were added that enabled the householder and his family to withdraw from specialized activities and to be alone if they should so wish. The house itself stood apart from its neighbors."³ He mentioned the various ways in which the middle-class or academic householder withdrew from the public sphere: by a complete rejection of gainful employment in the home, by a sentimental cult of closeness to nature, and finally by a clearcut, unmistakable separation of the residence (in the suburbs or in exurbia or in the condominiumized wilderness) from the office or factory or classroom. I find that the notices of houses for rent in the

columns of the classifieds in the *New York Review of Books* and the *Nation* give a wonderfully concise description of the ideal home of the professional or academic citizen: "Charming secluded environmentally friendly house: three bedrooms, three-car garage, swimming pool, solar energy, extensive library, breathtaking views of unspoiled rural landscape. Ideal for sabbatical hideaway or nature contacts. No smokers need apply; no pets, no children."

There is much comfort in the thought that this decadence is confined to a very small class, and that now, as in the past, the vast majority of Americans are committed to a different definition of the home. As one of the speakers at the conference observed, "Most historians have tended to generalize for the whole society on the basis of the middle-class experience. The process by which working-class families eventually adopted the new domestic lifestyle has not been documented. . . . For working-class families the home was not merely a private refuge; it was a resource that could be used for generating extra income."

The academic and professional middle class want their houses to be as inconspicuous as possible: to avoid being ostentatious, and to blend with the natural environment. But for the rest of us, the house is there to be seen. It shows that we are permanent members of the community — village, neighborhood, parish, school district, subdivision. In the words of a philosopher: "Property makes a man visible and accessible. I cannot see a man's mind or his character. But when I see what he has chosen and what he does with it, I know what he likes, and quite a good deal about his principles."

WHAT the average contemporary American dwelling tells us about the family is whether it is rich or poor and how much it values public opinion. The house tells us nothing about how the family makes its money, and reticence on that score is one of the benefits of our emphasis on privacy. But until three or four centuries ago in Europe, the size and exterior features of the house told us the social status of the family and how it contributed to the community; and that was because in those times home and place of work were one and the same. This was even true of the house or castle of the nobleman: by law he was allowed to adorn it with castellations and a moat and a dungeon to indicate that he had juridical powers and was committed to defending the community. The number of bays in the house of the yeoman indicated the number of acres he farmed and what he paid in taxes; in the case of certain ancient homesteads, a seven-foot fence showed that the owner had the right to maintain the king's peace among his servants and in his family, without police interference. The lowliest of houses was the one-bay cottage with less than enough land to farm. The cotter supported himself and his family by working for others and by what we now call cottage industries: the production of everyday items such as tools, pots, harness, even food that the other villagers could buy.

Thus almost every house in a medieval village fostered participation in the life of the community as a place of work or where certain services were performed. No less universal was the emphasis on visibility and accessibility. The cottage was open to the buying public and to the authorities; the nobleman's house had its hall for public assembly and its court for trials. It could be said that community flourished at the expense of privacy, not to preserve it. In towns where space was limited, the absence of privacy was notorious. A family

and its hired help often lived and worked in one room, and much of their activity spilled over into the street, where they displayed their wares. If a house impeded the flow of traffic or was the scene of too much rowdiness and noise, it could be moved or destroyed.

The community organized around work and public service functioned most smoothly in rural villages, where farmers, already accustomed to producing for their daily needs, set up home industries and made money selling to the villagers; for many, indeed, farm work was a secondary source of income. In *The Colonial Craftsman*,⁴ Carl Bridenbaugh reports that many colonial villages, especially in New England, rapidly evolved their own group of basic home manufactures and crafts, located within or next to the dwelling: part-time farmers produced wagons, tools, and utensils, tanned leather, made hats and shoes and furniture, and even produced food – “to the great convenience,” in the words of an 18th-century commentator, “and advantage of the neighborhood.” What we forget in our admiration of the colonial village is that it long retained those medieval controls on the size and location of houses, the limitations on privacy, and collective work obligations.

This arrangement came to an end with the industrialization of many crafts in the latter half of the 18th century, first in the towns, then in the countryside. Thomas Hubka's book *Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn*⁵ is a remarkable study of the way many New England farmers sought to keep alive the traditional relationship between home industries and the community, only to succumb to market-oriented one-crop agriculture. But in terms of the house, the divorce from community control and from the workplace came much earlier. Yi-Fu Tuan gives instances of it in the 14th century.⁶ Philippe Ariès says it was in the 16th

century that the house of the merchant and prosperous farmer began to be designed as a private autonomous domain dedicated to the joys of family life.⁷ Only in the 19th century, however, did the average American family discover privacy in the home. The monotony and shabbiness of many company towns and tenement buildings and early subdivisions should not deceive us. Each house was a private refuge; references to community and work are remote and invisible.

This is by no means the end of the story. Architectural historians, concentrating almost exclusively on the evolution of the middle-class house, avoid discussing changes in the wage-earner's house over the last 50 years, and social historians discuss the place of work largely in terms of the factory or mine or corporate farm. The ancient tradition of working at home as a secondary source of income is either ignored or dismissed as a kind of tinkering (made fashionable as a topic by Lévi-Strauss's discussion of *bricolage*.⁸) Someday a student will discover the American tradition of home industry as it expressed itself first in woodworking – a craft that 19th-century European travelers much admired – and then in the mid-19th century in our mechanical skills. It was on the farm that these were first manifest, and to this day the farmer is still an inventor of labor-saving devices and ways of using power. But the urban worker, lacking space at home and the expensive tools necessary for mechanical work, only really found his outlet with the popularization in the 1930s of the low-cost family automobile, closely followed by the popularization of the truck (and other commercial models) for family-oriented work. Possession of these expensive and useful objects involved not only repairs and maintenance but improvements and experimentation, and a new money-making career evolved – always centered on the house – of hauling and distributing and collecting, and of trans-

porting passengers, usually on a small, local scale. Although the house itself was left inviolate by this new home industry, the front lawn, the backyard, and the margin of the street were all taken over, to the dismay of neighbors. Further developments ensued: after World War II almost every low-cost house had an attached garage – spacious, equipped with light and power, easily accessible, and very visible. It provided space for work and for keeping tools, and its open door and driveway encouraged neighbors to come by and offer advice. Furthermore, it liberated the house itself from the dirt and confusion of the workplace and the occasional appearance on the kitchen table of oil filters and orange rags. The garage, in short, restored something like the old order of things: work in one part of the house, privacy in another.

ONE of the less celebrated accomplishments of technology was the production, beginning (I believe) in the 1950s, of power tools for the home. Power tools in industry and in construction were already common, but their availability in stores or for rent gave a remarkable boost to every garage industry and private craftsman. When we take the trouble to explore a blue-collar neighborhood, we are struck first of all by the immense number of garage industries focused on the automobile. They transcend all zoning regulations, all preservation programs, and all ethnic barriers (except in the most regimented of planned neighborhoods) and bring with them a scattering of used-car lots and auto junkyards and gas stations, not to mention traffic. But other, less spectacular home industries are in fact more numerous.

If these have any common denominator it is that they do chores and provide services that the modern family has neither the time nor talent to cope with. Even the most modest household, even the smallest trailer, contains a clutter of gadgets, most of them



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electronic and all of them prone to malfunctioning, from the electric carving knife to the electric trash compactor and the electric blanket. Invariably, they get out of whack after the guarantee has expired. What to do?

A man on Maple Street will take care of your problem when he gets home from work. You will find him in his garage. In another garage, on another emergency occasion, you will find a man who can mend furniture or put your power mower in shape, and elsewhere, in the house this time, a woman who bakes and decorates birthday cakes, or sells medicinal herbs or who is a part-time babysitter or instructor in classical guitar; and a man and his son who can repair computers and work on your car radio. All of these helpers request payment in cash to avoid income tax complications.

How do you find them? They never advertise; they are not in the Yellow Pages; and when you do locate them, they are likely to be away. It is essential that you be familiar with the neighborhood; it is essential that you know the work hours and can recognize the craftsman's car outside his or her favorite leisuretime resort – bingo parlor, laundromat, church. To take advantage of this array of industries and services, you have to be a member of the community of long standing.

There are two obvious reasons why these home enterprises flourish: they are convenient for their customers, and they are profitable for their owners. Our towns and cities have expanded enormously, thanks largely to the great increase in car ownership. As a result, it is a great undertaking to go into the central city to service and repair facilities. The modern mall, according to conventional wisdom, is the successor to Main Street, but in fact the mall has no room in its lavishly landscaped precincts for one-man enter-

prises. Who has ever seen a shoemaker or an upholsterer or a place where a toaster can be fixed in a mall? Garage industries are small, they are nearby, they are visible and accessible. Their background of domesticity – children and dogs and a vegetable garden, the smell of supper being prepared – makes the encounter a face-to-face social occasion. How can you complain if the job is less than professional and takes three days? We are all neighbors and are likely to meet soon again, at church or at the supermarket.

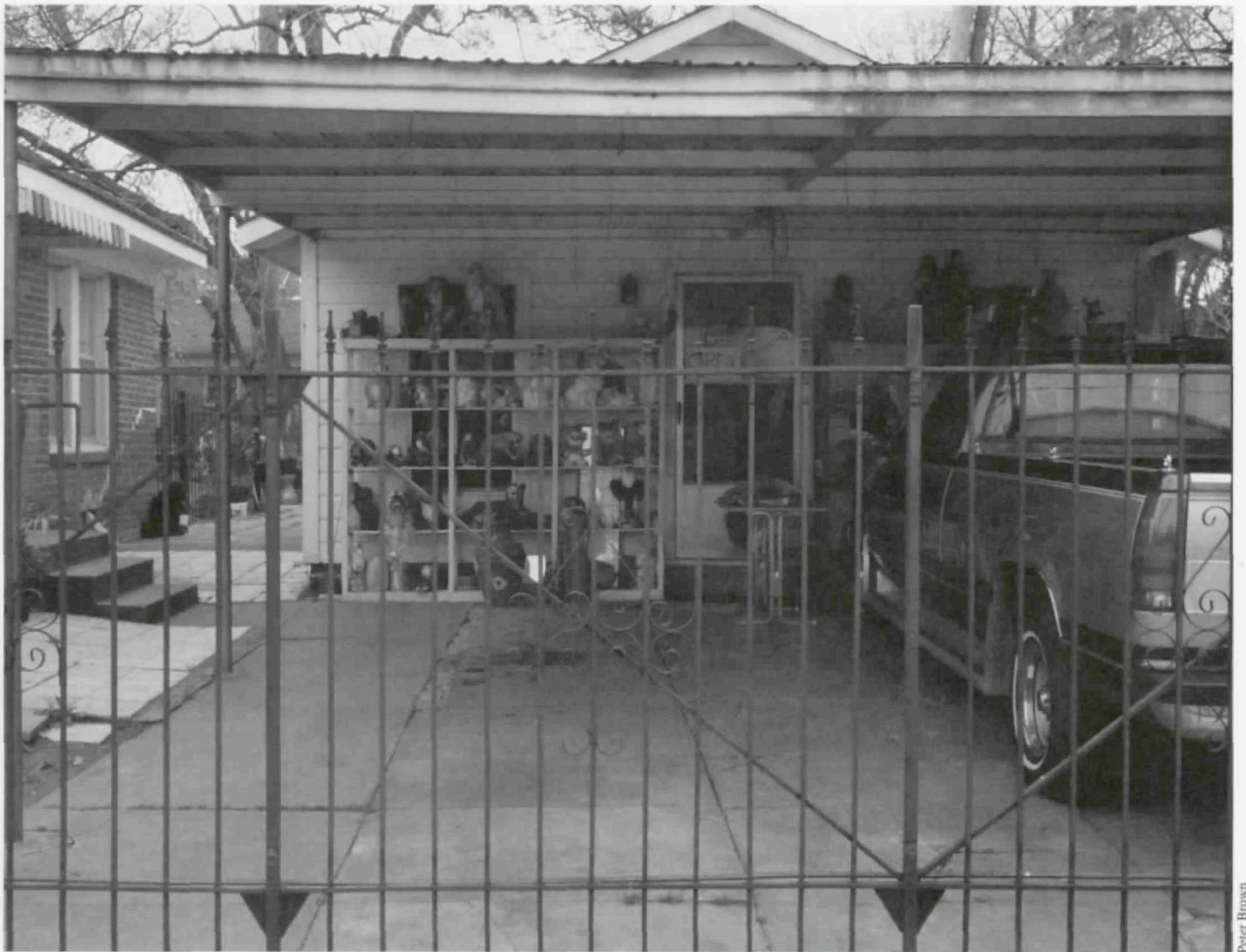
For the craftsman himself, the rewards are no less substantial. He is able to use the mechanical or industrial skills acquired in his full-time job to make extra money at home. He makes friends and plays a role in the local business world. If he is unusually skillful or inventive, he will be discovered by a wider clientele.

I have used the word community often and, I'm afraid, loosely. I was interested in establishing, very roughly, the boundaries of a kind of working-class neighborhood where everyone is mobile, has limited leisure time and has a limited income; a community whose everyday domestic needs can be satisfied by the people who live nearby, and in which each household contributes to the smooth flow of existence. A community of this sort does not derive from any utopian dream or any compact. In many instances it comes into being imperceptibly and naturally, and seems to work surprisingly well. I attribute that, at least in part, to the way in which people in the community define and use their house or home.

Many years ago I suggested that the low-income house, whether owned or rented, whether a trailer or a bungalow, could be likened in its effect on those who lived in it to a transformer. "The property of transformers," I wrote, "is that they neither increase nor decrease the energy in question, but merely change its form. . . . [The house] filters the crudities of nature, the lawlessness of society, and produces an atmosphere of temporary well-being, where vigor can be renewed for contact with the outside."⁹ That definition emphasized the privacy of the house, the interior as a refuge, and I still believe that this can be an important aspect. But the family itself, to say nothing of the public, judges the house as it relates to its surroundings, natural as well as social. We see the house as a sign not only of membership in the community, but of interaction with the community. So I am now inclined to believe that a better metaphor for the average house is an extended hand. It is the hand we raise to indicate our presence, the

hand that protects and holds what is its own. Like the hand, the house creates its own small world. It is the visible expression of our identity and our intentions: it is the hand that reaches out to establish and confirm relationships. Without it, we are never complete social beings. ■

- 1 Arien Mack, ed., *Home: A Place in the World, Social Research*, vol. 58, no. 1 (Spring 1991).
- 2 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Segmented Worlds and Self: Group Life and Individual Consciousness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 139.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 168.
- 4 Carl Bridenbaugh, *The Colonial Craftsman* (New York: NYU Press, 1950).
- 5 Thomas Hubka, *Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn: The Connected Farm Buildings of New England* (Hanover, N. H.: University Press of New England, 1984).
- 6 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Segmented Worlds*, pp. 66–67.
- 7 Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), pp. 392–93.
- 8 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 16–36.
- 9 J. B. Jackson, "The Westward-Moving House," in Ervin H. Zube, ed., *Landscapes: Selected Writings of J. B. Jackson* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1970), p. 36.



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