An Unattainable Salvation
Dirt, Danger & Domesticity in Old New York

It was 1832, and in the Five Points area of New York, a great street excavation was underway. What would cause such a flurry over the cobbles? Here, shovels plied the earth decades before the subway tunneled beneath the crowded streets. Electrical poles and telegraph lines had yet to become a nuisance worthy of inhumation. No one had found buried treasure. On the contrary—a combination of poverty, overcrowding, and municipal neglect had left the area drowning in a sea of debris. According to Five Points author Tyler Anbinder, contemporary accounts record street garbage reaching depths of two to three feet at its worst. The threat of cholera finally provoked city officials to tackle the sludge. But perhaps there was treasure under...
the dirt after all. When the cleaning was through, one resident expressed shock at finding actual paving stones beneath the mess.¹

While the conditions of the streets were never to reach such levels of putrescence again, grime continued to plague New York City for the rest of the century, particularly in the many over-crowded areas of poverty. During the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, concerned members of the middle and upper classes began to take an increasing interest in probing the layers of detritus that seemed poised to envelop the city. Their notions of pollution and dirt, however, extended beyond the physical filth of dense urban life. Using Mary Douglas’s definition of dirt as “matter out of place,” this essay argues that historical accounts show us how class-distinct cultural values of well-off New Yorkers shaped their views of “pollution” in the slums.² Believing that the degraded environment shaped the morals of tenement inhabitants, reformers sought to remold the city according to their own values of privacy and domesticity.³ These values, however, jarred with the spatial realities of the tenements, as well as the traditional social and cultural structures that shaped the lives of their inhabitants.

The nineteenth century American city experienced growth like an awkward adolescent—changing and filling out at an astonishing rate, with accompanying feelings of confusion and uncertainty. Leaps in technology and methods of production transformed industry. Revolutions in transportation expanded this new industry’s reach, connecting people, places, and products in regional networks. American cities began to specialize even as the world that was available to them began to generalize.⁴ The cultural make-up of the city was in constant flux as immigrants flocked in ever increasing numbers to the Land of Opportunity. But the reality of the nineteenth century American urban space was far from any ideal. Such rapid shifting produced not only progress but also chaos and anxiety. The city was unprepared to deal with this growth. A lack of
adequate affordable housing crowded newcomers ever closer. Deficient sanitation and waste
disposal only served to cultivate the numbers of the Great Unwashed. Spurred on by the lack of
protective legislation as well as the anonymity of the crowded city, the unscrupulous preyed
undeterred upon the desperate and unsuspecting. The city had outgrown the former societal
threads which had kept it clothed in relative civility. Boundaries were fraying and social roles
were straining.

New York was no exception. The city’s inhabitants found themselves in a liminal space
and felt danger in the lack of definition. According to Mary Douglas, for pollution to exist, there
must be cultural frameworks to define what is “out of place.” Yet liminal spaces lack the
boundaries necessary to formulate normative judgments. The resulting ambiguity can be both
exhilarating and disturbing. It was the middle class who felt the danger of the liminal urban
space most keenly—the wealthy could escape the mess, while the poor were too distracted by the
everyday struggle for existence. In response, a small army of determined bourgeois reformers
sallied forth into the slums armed with rigid cultural frameworks. By imposing them onto the
impoverished areas of New York they hoped to restore order to the city, first by identifying
pollution—moral and physical—and then cleaning it up. These cultural frameworks would lay
strong invisible foundations on which they might build a new and moral city. Strong binaries
formed the backbone of bourgeois cultural structures. These binaries drew a line between what
was pure and impure in the urban space—the middle class had to divide the mess before they
could conquer it.

Domestic advice books for the middle class homemaker became wildly popular in the
mid-nineteenth century and made clear the rules of bourgeois propriety and its prescribed use of
space. The books provided a recipe for constructing spaces that, if carefully followed, would
create the ideal American family—ordered, pure, and happy. Drawing upon the strict binaries that coded middle class life, the books focused on separating and structuring spaces in and around the home. In 1843, one such advice writer Catharine Beecher penned instructive prose steeped in religious and moral overtones that illustrate this middle class domestic blueprint. Referring to the home as the “Home Church of Jesus Christ,” the family’s house was to rely on privacy from the public sphere and spaces with clearly defined purposes to preserve its sanctity. Beecher also stressed strict gender binaries to order domestic space, giving to the woman the realm of the home and to the man the world that lay beyond. This was not intended to denigrate women as slaves tied by their apron strings to the stove—Beecher argued for the dignity and sanctity of “women’s work” with her own “domestic feminism.” After all, in Beecher’s vision, the woman was the minister of the Home Church. Yet it was through separate, gendered spheres that Beecher hoped to order the world and streamline it for efficiency and progress. In her 1843 Treatise on Domestic Economy Beecher quotes Alexis de Tocqueville who advocated “carefully dividing the duties of man from those of woman, in order that the great work of society may be the better carried on.” The ideal family was efficient, private, and heavily reliant on gender roles to foster a nurturing home environment. Rules and duties were clear, and harmony existed though obeisance to them.

This idealized family existed in the wholesome calm of the verdant countryside—not amidst the bustling noise of the city. A rural/urban binary came down heavily in favor of a pastoral ideal, especially since Americans of the era firmly believed that the surrounding environment was linked to moral character. An illustration from Beecher’s book depicts “A Christian Home” cozily situated between tall pines, a grassy yard, and a winding stream. Children play innocently in the yard, safe in the secluded enclave. Domesticity was at home in
the countryside. The city—chaotic, dirty, industrial—was no place to raise a family. For most of the middle class, this rural ideal was a dream rather than a reality. Yet this yen for rolling lawns and picket fences influenced the way they regarded the urban space—as degraded compared to the pastures of the country.

Foremost among the city’s affronts to domesticity was its lack of privacy. Privacy was among middle class’s most cherished values. In a rural space, privacy existed to such an extent that it often verged on isolation. Yet with the ever-increasing press of a swelling population, privacy in the city was hard to come by and private and public spaces became difficult to separate. At first, escaping to rural suburbs seemed to be a solution, yet the growing city was always close on middle-class heels. Jacob Riis, author of How the Other Half Lives bemoans that “rapid transit to the suburbs… brought no relief. We know now that there is no way out; that the “system” that was the evil offspring of public neglect and private greed has come to stay…”

They yearned for clearly designated public and private spaces and were horrified by the way the lower classes mixed the two. Overcrowding of the tenements, as well as the common practice of taking in boarders also offended middle-class propriety by reducing or eliminating privacy. At its very essence, the conflict over the use of urban space revolved around a concept of waste. For the middle class, waste was a noun—the offensive byproduct that accumulated as a result of lacking respect for private spaces. For the lower classes, however, waste was a verb—the act of not taking advantage of all of one’s resources, even if that meant getting dirty in the process.

Not that getting dirty presented a challenge in the New York tenements. Conditions were a far cry from the fresh pastoral image in Beecher’s book. Reformers often emphasized the horrible stench that arose from the poorer areas of the city. The human density, combined with a lack of adequate ventilation, sanitation, and plumbing produced a public health nightmare.
New York State investigative committee reported mid-century that tenement “floors were covered in dirt, which had lain so long that, with occasional slops of water and continued treading on, it had the appearance of the greasy refuse of a woolen mill. There were sluggish, yellow drops pending from the low ceilings, and a dank, green slime upon the walls.”xi While many tried their best to make do with the space they had, the living conditions of the poor were ideal only to the rats and other pests that thrived in the dark and dank hovels. The life of those who dwelled within the tenements also contrasted with the middle-class version of domesticity. Family structures were more fluid than the tight, nuclear family advocated by the middle class advice writers. And to the middle classes, parenting techniques of the lower classes appeared neglectful or even corrupting.

Because space in the city was limited, some sort of urban reform that addressed poverty was direly needed if the bourgeois were to have any hope of creating the private and quiet domestic sphere they longed for. For the generation after Beecher, the city itself became a massive domestic space that could be similarly ordered and organized for maximum efficiency and morality.xii Many reformers chose to focus on New York’s tenements because they were physically polluted by anyone’s standards, and morally polluted by their own bourgeois standards. Prevailing ideas of environmental determinism only underscored the need for urban reform: a dirty city produced immoral people. If the physical dirt could spark the outbreak of disease, contemporary wisdom also held that morality (or a lack thereof) was contagious, too. One New York minister feared an effect on his parishioners if they so much as read about the slums: “You will incur fearful risks in perusing the story of demoralization,” he warned.xiii The combined concepts of contagion and environmental determinism characterized the reformers’
approach to their mission—they focused primarily on ordering and cleaning the spaces of the poor, rather than targeting the economic causes of poverty.

Bourgeois culture had created a fictive domestic ideal; its visions of the slums likewise relied on an element of fiction. While the bourgeois projected their domestic image through a rose-colored glass, their portraits of the slums were sensationalized to highlight the pollution they found there. A widening divide between rich and poor during the nineteenth century had increased the contrast between the two worlds, leading to the view of the poor as a separate “other”—an idea popularized by Benjamin Disraeli in his 1845 novel Sybil, or the Two Nations."xiv The tenements were also largely peopled by immigrants, and bourgeois xenophobia
added to the feeling that the poor were a nation unto themselves, a “class apart.”

Regarding tenement life, one late nineteenth century reformer told her bourgeois audience “as far as Mercury is from Saturn is this under-world from yours, gentle reader.” The lives of the impoverished were so far removed from the bourgeois sphere that by mid-century, many members of the middle and upper classes had little idea what the worst areas of New York really looked like.

The reformers, however, were determined to change that. Tenement exposés, most notably Jacob Riis’ How the Other Half Lives, published in 1895, brought shocking images of tenement life into the homes of the privileged classes. Riis’ title itself displays the attitude that the poor were more than just spatially separate from the rich. His use of early flash photography gave Riis’ book great impact as he shed physical and metaphorical light onto the dark and crowded tenements. The technique, as well as Riis’ own compositional efforts, sensationalized

Flash photography shed light into the dark corners of tenement life, bringing images of the desperate conditions of the poor into the homes of the middle class. The stark black and white of the photography reflected the harshly simplistic way the middle class judged what they saw. Illuminating the darkness continued to be a theme of tenement exposé imagery and literature.

1.5. Jacob Riis photograph, 1890. <http://www.chicopee.mec.edu/Curriculum/Old_Site/History/July/riis_small.gif>
the images, highlighting the cramped and dirty feeling of the rooms. The theme of casting light into the darkness suited the reformers’ mission—they were carrying the beacon of purity and salvation into the shaded, chaotic, and immoral spaces inhabited by the poor. Illumination became a theme of many of the slum exposés, as evinced by the title and frontispiece of Darkness and Daylight, or the Lights and Shadows of New York Life published in 1899.

The juxtaposition of light and dark, made even starker by the black and white photographic technology of the era, heightened the sense of a binary morality. Like the harsh lighting of the photographs, the discourse of reform took an unnuanced approach to the tenements. Riis himself starkly wrote that “in the tenements all the influences make for evil.”xvii The flashbulb may have revealed the tenement rooms as complex and crowded homes, but the reformers filtered out the visual noise with their bourgeois domestic ideals and saw instead the simplest version of the scene: pollution. Employed to eliminate ambiguity, their rigid cultural structures left little room for “grey” areas.
An overcrowded boarding house. Reformers found the lack of privacy to be just as polluting as the physical dirt which overcrowding created. The caption reads: “New York City—Cheap Lodging-Houses As Nests of Disease—A Night Scene in a “Five Cent” Den on Pearl Street.”

1.7. A page from Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, March 1882. From the Library of Congress. <www.loc.gov>

The reformers blamed the nature of the tenements’ physical spaces for the moral pollution they found. Tenement overcrowding and spatial ambiguity were particularly offensive to their domestic ideal of a private and clearly defined home space. A witness from a mid-nineteenth century court case chronicled in the New York Tenement Commission describes “tendencies to immorality and crime where there is very close packing of human beings of the lower order in intelligence and morals.” This lack of private space in the tenements “diminishes in the women and the girls the modesty which they should have” according to Dr. Annie S. Daniel when she testified to the same commission. New Yorkers blamed crime on
those whose “homes had ceased to be sufficiently separate.” Even for those tenement dwellers who might exhibit what the middle class would consider “sufficient moral character,” environmental determinism left little hope. In Darkness and Daylight Helen Campbell notes that “often respectable men and women out of work drift into the neighborhood, falling always a little lower, till the worst is reached in one of these houses given over to uncleanness.” The slums, then, were the breeding grounds of the city’s problems, and presented a direct challenge to the bourgeois domestic ideal—they “touched the family life with deadly moral contagion.” This was the “worst crime” of the tenements.

If the problem of the tenements started with the home, then the solution dwelt there too. Riis thought the best way to combat drunkenness was to “[provide] for every man a clean and comfortable home.” Providing that clean and comfortable home, however, was no simple matter. Preventing overcrowding was a challenge. With the population mushrooming there was simply not enough housing to shelter the huddled masses. The tenements had formed because it was profitable for landlords to continually subdivide the units they owned. The demand for cheap living space was great enough that poor New Yorkers, particularly new immigrants, would crowd ever closer for a roof over their heads. Privacy was a luxury they could not afford—they had to crowd into one, or if they were lucky, two rooms no matter the size of their family, which was often large. Taking in boarders was also common, further exacerbating the problem and shocking middle class domestic sensibilities. Strangers were out of place residing in the bourgeois home—they polluted the private domestic environment. Yet for those living in the tenements, taking in boarders benefitted both the boarder, giving them shelter, and the families who housed them by giving them an additional source of income. Crowded people were not only the object of the reformer’s scorn—they also objected to what they saw as the cluttered
arrangement of the tenement interiors. Reformers did not take into account how the cultural heritage of many of the tenement dwellers informed how they set up their homes. The family heirlooms and over-ornamented mass-produced furniture pieces that took up much of the limited space were “dirty” rather than decorative or nostalgic.\textsuperscript{xxvi}

Above, the disorder and filth of the old slums. Below, a new model tenement: orderly, clean, and respectable, if only so in print. The caption reads: “New York City—The Old and The New Styles of Tenement Houses.”

Since middle class reformers only saw the tenements in terms of domestic pollution, their solutions were largely artificial and did not address the root causes of the problems they were trying to fix. Slum clearance was a popular solution to overcrowding and the sanitary hazards of the tenements. Merely seen as toxic environments, the reformers did not take into account the fact that the tenements were the result of a lack of adequate affordable housing. Some reformers did try to design better tenement housing—models that were orderly and clean like Fig. 1.8. However, the only real result of the attempt was James E. Ware Jr.’s notorious “dumbbell” tenement, which while economically profitable, was in few ways better than the building designs that preceded it. Other attempts to create more habitable and domestically suitable living spaces for the poor were similarly unsuccessful. The crusade against the windowless tenement room produced many windows that looked not outside, but rather into the next crowded room. Such windows would only reduce privacy instead of providing light and ventilation.

Children and the spaces they inhabited were also a large concern of the domestically minded reformers. The cramped, chaotic, and grime-encrusted homes of the poor were a far cry from the bourgeois domestic ideal, and environmental determinism claimed that such “depraved” surroundings created equally degraded children. Dr. Annie S. Daniel testified that she had “watched some of the young girls and boys grow up in [tenement] families” whose “characters would undoubtedly have been better had they been in better surroundings.” Yet paradoxically, reformers saw children not only as victims of the toxic tenement environment, but also as polluting agents contributing to the problem. The children of the tenements spent much of their time outside of the home, particularly in the streets. Rather than view this as an improvement—
children exploring in the fresh air instead of smothered in the noxious interiors—reformers were horrified.xxxi Children were shockingly “out of place” in the dangerous liminal space of the streets. Just as the woman’s sphere was in the home, so too did children belong there. The home was a sheltering and nurturing influence, even if it was cramped and rotten. On the streets children were in the public space and unsupervised. A vagrant child was both “a pitiable spectacle” and a “menace to society.”xxxii The streets gave children frightening independence and presented them with ambiguous moral boundaries. Middle class reformers saw these wandering children as evidence of parental neglect, imposing their own ideas of domesticity onto the lives of the poor.xxxiii Vulnerable and innocent children were to be carefully cultivated—not left to wander like weeds.

Domestic depictions: the middle class ideal— the nurtured indoor child—and middle class representations of lower class families—torn apart by alcohol and loose morals, with abandoned children wandering in the streets.

1.10. “All My Drinks 3 Cents” from *Darkness and Daylight in New York*, 1899.
Lower-class parents had few objections to children roaming the streets. While cultural attitudes of the middle class were shifting towards viewing children as emotionally priceless yet economically useless, poor children were still expected to contribute to the family income. Many of them did this by scavenging in the streets, collecting bits of refuse—sometimes even stealing—to earn a small wage. Thus, time on the streets taught children the necessary self-sufficiency required to survive in the harsh world of New York City. Nor were the children always as unsupervised as they appeared to be. Middle class reformers did not take into account the larger kin and cultural networks which the poor employed to keep an eye on the kids.

This image, from a Children’s Aid Society promotional pamphlet, shows reformers “rescuing” abandoned children living under the unwholesome influence of the street. The gathered children were delivered to wholesome farm families, like the one in the lower right corner. Nurtured by the domesticity and privacy provided by their new family, they worked hard and became upstanding citizens. In reality, the situation was not so idyllic or simple.

1.11. Illustration from The Crusade for Children, 1928.
The reformers’ responded to the problem by invoking their domestic ideal. One solution, the Children’s Aid Society, was founded in 1853 by Charles Loring Brace to help the many orphaned and vagrant children who roamed the streets of New York. The Society’s main aim was to take “the wild, neglected little outcast of the streets” and “[bring] him up to honest, healthy labor” in the “healthful and moral surroundings” of the countryside.\textsuperscript{xxxvi} This mission, heavily influenced by the idea of environmental determinism, also drew upon Beecher’s idea of the rural space being a wholesome place for children. And so from 1854 to 1929 the CAS herded many children onto trains headed out West where they could experience the transformative powers of moral labor and pure air. But there was a difference between the idealistic vision portrayed in the CAS’s promotional materials and the reality of the organization. Many of the children were not orphans—the family situations of the poor were more complicated that many of the reformers bothered to realize. Nor were the families with whom they were placed always an improvement over those they left behind. Frequently the farmers who took in orphan children were only interested in the free labor they provided.\textsuperscript{xxxvii}

A “typical” CAS host family home, as described by their promotional materials, which closely resembles the Beecher ideal.

1.12. Photograph from The Emigration of Homeless Children to the Country, 1910.
Alternatively, some reformers hoped to add structure to the outdoor spaces that children inhabited instead of sending them away. At the turn of the century, a movement began which stressed creating spaces in the urban fabric directly targeted at children—small parks and playgrounds. These spaces were carefully organized and structured, and created a “moral” space in which children might spend time. Many small parks had special organized activities that complimented the carefully ordered spaces. Playgrounds provided a “moral” alternative to the ambiguity and danger of the streets. And by letting children play—even if that play was organized—the reformers provided what was one of the more successful elements of urban reform.

Wading through the detritus of the tenements, the Gilded Age and Progressive Era bourgeois reformers were much like the small group of New Yorkers who dug through the grime of Five Points in 1832. Unlike the New Yorkers of 1832, however, their inquiry did not strike on something solid and sturdy beneath. Instead the reformers found a complicated and fluid social environment which they found dangerous and difficult to comprehend. They thus attempted to structure the spaces of the tenements according to their own cultural views that focused on a private and segregated domesticity. Yet these bourgeois cultural structures held uneven footing in the world of the New York poor, going against lower-class traditions or practicality. So while the reformers succeeded in shaping the popular vision and the physical world of the tenements, they did not create a sound enough foundation to solve the problems that they hoped to address.
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vii Ibid.


ix Wright, “Americanization,”114-134.


xi Anbinder, *Five Points*, 82.

xii Hayden, “Feminism,” 55-179.


xiv Ibid., 25.

 xv Ibid., 25.


xvi Ibid., 209.

 xvii Riis, *Other Half*, 3.


 xix Ibid., 530.


 xxi Campbell, *Darkness and Daylight*, 108.

 xxii Riis, *Other Half*, 3.

 xxiii Ibid.

 xxiv Ibid., 4.

 xxv Wright, “Americanization,” 118-119.

 xxvi Ibid., 132.

 xxvii Ibid., 131.

 xxviii Ibid., 122.


 xxx *RTHC*, 530-531.


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