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# Book Review

**Book Reviewed:** Sophie Watson, *Accommodating Inequality*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1988.

**Length:** 157 pages

**Price:** \$14.95 paperback

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Sophie Watson's *Accommodating Inequality* is the most recent addition to the gender and housing literature in Australia. It is a welcome book for two reasons: first it will stimulate further debate, research and theorising, and second it will ensure that the question of women and housing will not slip from its current high position on the urban research agenda.

*Accommodating Inequality* seeks to explore the way that housing in Australia has helped to produce and reproduce patriarchal family structures and thereby has simultaneously contributed to the dependence of women on men. To Watson's credit, she does not limit her interest to issues of theory alone, and states at the outset her interest in contributing to policy analysis (p. viii). Taken together, these are ambitious objectives, embracing as they do a host of thorny problems which have long plagued family, housing and policy studies.

The book consists of eight independent essays, two being revised versions of already published papers (chapters two and three) and another two consisting of material derived from an earlier research project (chapters six and seven).

Sophie Watson has become widely known in urban and feminist circles, and no doubt many will be pleased to be able to acquire some of her earlier writings in this accessible form. However, it is a pity that the publishers have not acknowledged on the cover that *Accommodating Inequality* consists of a collection of independent essays, rather than a completely new and integrated work.

The chapters of the book cover a range of issues, some being predominantly theoretical, others mainly empirical. Chapter one provides to the uninitiated an overview of gender relations and housing provision in Australian history. Chapter two seeks to set out a theoretical and conceptual framework to guide the next five, predominantly empirical chapters. These empirical chapters deal with home ownership and women (chapter three), private rental housing and women (chapter four), housing, divorce and women (chapter five), and older women and housing (chapters six and seven). The final chapter (chapter eight) of the book provides a succinct and clear summary of the main strands of thought in existing feminist contributions to the housing question.

The book leaves the reader in no doubt that, throughout their lives, women in Australia are less likely than men to acquire access to secure, affordable and suitable forms of housing. Through a combination of labour market position, relatively low incomes, and discrimination by finance institutions, estate agents and public housing authorities, unmarried women remain disadvantaged relative to men in purchasing a home of their own,

in renting a house privately, and, unless they have children, in gaining access to public rental housing. Marriage and motherhood, however, offer no solution to these problems: with marriage comes dependence on a husband's income, and the latter becomes crucial for continuing access both to owner occupied and privately rented accommodation. Hence the dilemma facing women who wish to escape violent or unhappy marriages: escape from a violent husband means loss of the income so vital for adequate participation in private housing markets. In this way housing (particularly when owner occupied) becomes a major resource for the continuing domination of men over women.

As a set of readings on gender and housing, *Accommodating Inequality* represents a useful introductory text, parts of which may be useful for undergraduate courses in urban and welfare studies (the final chapter will be particularly useful for those seeking a good, brief summary of feminist housing theory).

I do, however, have some major reservations about recommending this book for a wider, broader readership.

Putting together a book which consists of collected essays that have been written over a number of years is not an easy task, particularly when, as is the case with *Accommodating Inequality*, the essays deal with a wide range of theoretical, empirical and policy issues, some of which overlap. A researcher's ideas and views change over time; some explanations are modified, others are sharpened, others are rejected altogether. It is extremely important that each essay is carefully edited to avoid duplication and inconsistency. It is also important to modify essays in ways which take account of or acknowledge criticisms that have been made of earlier work. *Accommodating Inequality* can be criticised for failing adequately to avoid these problems.

There is much duplication of ideas throughout the book. For example, reproduced in several chapters are almost identical comments and arguments concerning the difficulties women face in gaining access to housing finance (pp. 29, 44-47, and 86); on the high proportion of women relative to men who live in major urban centres (pp. 31, 82, 109); on Australia's relatively high home ownership rate (pp. 26, 39, 75); on women's low incomes and disadvantaged position in the labour market relative to men (pp. 8-9, 29, 43, 57, 77-78, 103-5, 113, 121); and on government housing finance assistance schemes (pp. 29-30, 48-49). The extent of duplication is in part a product of inadequate editing, but it also reflects the way that many of the chapters depend on almost identical underlying themes and explanations which are simply applied to women in different stages of the family life

cycle. This leads me to question whether many of the original essays were sufficiently different from one another to warrant publication in a book form. It certainly makes reading the book over a short time period a somewhat tedious exercise. It also limits the usefulness of the book for teaching purposes.

Inadequate editing is also, I suspect, primarily responsible for the numerous inconsistencies which can be found between the chapters. For example, after having argued that detached housing imposes unnecessary domestic chores on women (pp. 23, 25), and that smaller, higher density dwelling types would be more appropriate, Watson also claims that single parents and single women are disadvantaged precisely because, relative to traditional families and single men, they are currently over represented in medium density accommodation (pp. 36, 61, 108)! Similarly, after having argued that low start housing loans which involve increasing payments over time disadvantage women relative to men (presumably because Watson believes that their incomes do not increase in real terms over time?) (p. 29), Watson later suggests that these innovative forms of housing finance are in fact beneficial to women (pp. 47, 86)! The reader is also informed on several occasions (pp. 31, 82) that one explanation for the predominance of women relative to men in major urban areas is the "lack of low cost housing in rural areas, the lack of provision of . . . transport and other necessary services in rural areas" but then is later informed that older women are possibly disadvantaged by their under-representation in rural areas ("particularly country towns and villages") because this denies them easy access to shops, doctors and community centres (p. 109)! Finally, in the last chapter of the book, Watson is critical of feminists who imply in their writings that "there is a direct relation between men's dominance in the architectural, planning etc. professions, and women's unmet housing needs" (p. 140), and is also critical of those who imply that "physical structures and urban forms . . . give rise to certain forms of behaviour (and) operate as constraints" (p. 141). However, in earlier chapters she seems to invoke these same sorts of arguments. In chapters one and two she suggests that women should have a greater say in the planning and design of their housing (pp. 20, 25), and that "the individual and isolated nature of (detached) dwellings serves to reinforce the interdependence of family relationships and the privatised nature of family life . . . (And) the very way rooms are constructed and conceptualised reinforces a specific set of social relations" (p. 23).

These inconsistencies are not, however, only evident between chapters. Sometimes they occur within a chapter. In chapter two, for example, we are told that "Low income families, often single parents, have little choice but to buy into (outer)

urban wastelands where prices are lower" (p. 25). One sentence later, however, we are then told that "the 'suburban dream' is a reality few can achieve, unaffordable to many"! And in the same chapter Watson criticises detached housing because "the potential for domestic violence to erupt is not inhibited by the presence of neighbours within earshot" (p. 23), but then proceeds to criticise high density public housing because "tenants lack privacy" (p. 32)!

My reservations about *Accommodating Inequality* extend beyond issues of repetition, duplication and inconsistency. It would appear that the book was put together hurriedly. This is because there are many cases throughout the text of ill-considered or inadequately referenced statements. For example, in chapter two Watson claims that "Research evidence suggests that (women's) isolation can lead to symptoms of depression, even anguish . . ." (p. 23), and in chapter seven she claims that "An analysis of the literature (on ethnic women) suggests that the difficulties that women face in old age are compounded for ethnic women by language problems, alienation . . . isolation and poverty" (p. 112). On neither occasion, however, is any reference made to the actual research studies involved. As such they remain plausible assertions rather than carefully researched statements of fact (see also pp. 31-2, 36, 71, 92 for other examples). Examples of ill-considered statements are also not difficult to find. On page 23 we are told that "From the viewpoint of capital, detached houses represent an outlet for capital, first in constructing them, then in furnishing them with the trappings of our society: washing machines, freezers, dishwashers, and the like". It is disappointing to find that statements like this (for another example see page 29) are included in the book because they have been made by numerous writers over the years (particularly during the 1970s), and have been widely criticised over the last ten years for their generalised 'functionalist' tone (see for example Saunders, 1980; 1986; Gray, 1982; Rose, 1980).

I also have major reservations about the theoretical and conceptual framework underpinning the book. I am not qualified to comment in a detailed way on the adequacy of Watson's feminist analysis, but there are two main problems to which

reference needs to be made. First, chapters four through to seven seem to lack any coherent theoretical framework, and could therefore legitimately be criticised as being examples of the 'theoretical feminist urban analysis' to which Watson herself refers in chapter eight (pp. 139-140). Second, chapters one and two seem to rely quite heavily on the arguments developed during the late 1970s and early 1980s by Jim Kemeny concerning the causes and consequences of mass home ownership in Australia. The main difference between Watson's and Kemeny's views — and it is an important one — is that Watson gives much greater emphasis than Kemeny does to the way that successive post-World War Two politicians actively encouraged home ownership at the expense of other tenures apparently with a view to bolstering patriarchal family relations. Watson's preparedness uncritically to accept Kemeny's form of analysis is a disappointing aspect of the book because Kemeny's writings have been subjected to an important critique in recent years (see for example Ball 1982; Hayward, 1986; see also Kemeny's response, 1987) and alternative approaches have been developed (see in particular Ball, 1983; 1986). Watson of course is entitled to defend and support Kemeny's form of analysis, but it is disappointing that she fails to acknowledge both the criticisms that have been advanced and the alternative explanations that have been developed.

*Accommodating Inequality* can also be criticised for the heavy reliance that is placed throughout the book on the 1981 census as a data source. Watson does acknowledge that at the time of writing, the 1986 census cross-tabulations she required were not available. However, because the 1981 census data are now eight years old, and have recently been superceded by the 1986 census data, the usefulness of the book is further diminished.

My final criticism is that the book does not make clear the extent to which the system of housing provision bears responsibility for both the housing problems experienced by women (as distinct from all housing consumers) and the reproduction of patriarchal relations in general. Watson does present some evidence to show that women are disadvantaged by the patriarchal and sexist attitudes displayed by 'gatekeepers and managers' in finance institutions, estate agents, government

housing policy agencies, and public housing authorities. However, she also admits that given women's inferior labour market position and the commodified nature of housing provision in Australia, much of this discrimination is understandable (see for example pp. 28, 43). Women's inferior labour market position is also acknowledged by Watson as being a (the?) major contributing factor to the problems that women experience gaining access to affordable and adequate housing (see for example pp. 38, 55). The implication here is that the solution to the housing problems which women experience would be resolved not through changes to the system of housing provision, but primarily through policies or processes which produce a more equitable gender division of labour both inside and outside the home.

In sum, while *Accommodating Inequality* will be of interest to select groups of readers, I have little doubt that the book would have benefitted considerably from a much tighter integration of the various chapters, the removal of the numerous inconsistencies I have outlined above, the provision of more recent theoretical and empirical material, and the adoption throughout the book of a much more clearly articulated theoretical framework.

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