

7-1. How do you see larger social notions regarding gender and domesticity affecting the work of any one architect? Take one building or one architect, not included in the readings or discussion, and illustrate.

The World's Most Famous Home

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As a symbol of larger social notions of gender and domesticity, The White House in Washington, D.C. deserves special consideration. Designed by James Hoban for George Washington, the home of the president and the office of the president easily co-existed in the same mansion. As offices in the U.S. became less and less domestic, however, pressure grew to separate the office function from the president's domestic life and the West Wing was constructed in 1902. The struggle between "masculine" and "feminine" functions of the White House had been ongoing since Jefferson's time. Jefferson, a widower, overtly excluded women from political roles at the White House, restricting social functions to intimate affairs.(1) With the arrival of Dolly Madison in 1809, however, prominent members of Washington's elite and congressman were regularly invited to the Drawing Room and state dinners, and women's role in political debates grew. She transformed Jefferson's private office into the State Dining Room, and his sitting room into her reception parlor and the Blue Room became her drawing room (furnished by Benjamin Latrobe). Even today, the role of First Lady in state social and political affairs is constantly balanced by images of her as a "good mother and wife". Upon taking up residence in what Margaret Truman calls "The World's Most Famous Home", First Ladies have always performed rituals of domestication before the national media, primarily through redecoration and establishing a protocol for social functions at the White House, but occasionally through substantial architectural propositions.

The Army engineers proposed the first plan to separate the president's office in a separate wing in 1889, but first lady Caroline Harrison instructed the architect Fred Owen to draw up her own design. Her first concern was to increase the domestic space for the crowding of her family, as well as add two wings on the south side, creating an interior courtyard. One wing housed a national art collection, while the other served as offices for the president and his staff. This un-financed and un-built plan later inspired Edith Roosevelt to work with Charles McKim, creating nine bedrooms for her nine member family, each with a private bathroom. Mrs. Roosevelt also instructed McKim to create the portrait gallery for first ladies on the garden level, a secondary public space near the coatroom. According to McKim's biography, Mrs. Roosevelt was the chief client, not the president.(2) The Roosevelts fought against political pressure to move the President's residence to another location, instead supporting the creation of the West Wing for the offices of the President. In the main building, within the domestic sphere of the second level, Edith Roosevelt established the Office of the First Lady, officially recognizing her role in orchestrating the social functions of the White House while still not transgressing into the public area of the president's office. In fact, even the master stair to the second floor was moved to restrict public access to the domestic sphere.

While Caroline Harrison and later Edith Roosevelt contributed significantly to the arrangement of domestic spaces and their separation from the official spaces of the White House, the legacy they left has become a museological and decorative one. For example, Jacqueline Kennedy introduced scholarship into the decorative history of the White House, and first lady Laura Bush designed the current carpet in the Oval Office. However, the more radical moves of Dolly Madison could have only occurred during a time when the larger social definition of the “office” remained partly domestic in character.

1. Truman, Margaret. *The President's House: a First Daughter Shares the History and Secrets of the World's Most Famous Home*. NY: Ballantine Books, 2003.
2. Moore, Charles. *The Life and Times of Charles Follen McKim*. Boston and NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1929.
3. Many of the facts of this essay come from Sarah Fayen, “Inhabiting an Icon: First Ladies and the White House” in *Blueprints Magazine*, Winter 2000.