

“A kitchen that wastes no steps...”

Gender, Class and the Home Improvement Plan, 1936-40

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This article assesses the gender and class implications of the Home Improvement Plan (HIP) in Canada during the 1930s. The HIP was a major job creation programme which offered low-interest loans to encourage households to undertake home renovations. Advertisements for the plan, mainly targeted at women, focused on the advantages of streamlining and modernizing homes. The authors argue that the plan differentiated the strata of the working class, assigned women to domesticity and never attempted to tackle the problem of housing endured by the nation's poor.

Dans cet article, les auteures présentent un exposé détaillé des objectifs et des résultats du « Home Improvement Plan » (HIP) au Canada durant les années 1930. Le HIP proposait des prêts à faible taux d'intérêt dans le but d'encourager les ménages à faire rénover leurs logis et, ainsi, il visait à pallier certains problèmes causés par la crise. S'adressant surtout aux femmes, la publicité mettait l'accent sur les avantages de rationaliser et de moderniser les maisons. Les auteures affirment que le plan en question ne s'adressait pas à toutes les couches de la classe ouvrière, qu'il assignait les femmes à la sphère domestique et que jamais il n'a tenté de s'attaquer au problème du logement qu'éprouvaient les pauvres.

“When is a kitchen not a kitchen?” was a question posed in January 1937 by a press release for Canada's Home Improvement Plan (HIP). Women were told that the “old-fashioned” and “inefficient” kitchens which most of them used were “not worthy of the name.”¹ Advertisements such as this aimed to enlist the support of women for the federal government's major job creation project during the late years of the Depression. The Home Improvement Plan, one of the few recommendations of the National Employment Commission (NEC) to be implemented by the federal government, was designed to relieve unemployment through a nation-wide scheme of residential renovation and repair.² Clearly intended to defuse radicalism among the jobless, the policy, in its media presentation to the public, operated to blur class distinctions; in actuality it may have helped to redraw and harden class lines. Paraded as a boon to the ‘average’ home-owner, the Plan was an attempt to win over the property-owning stratum of the working class to the existing social and economic order. By the provision of low interest loans the securely employed male wage

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1. Public Archives of Canada [PAC], Record Group 27, Department of Labour Records, Vol. 3347, file 5, [HIP] Press Release #20; Vol. 3355, file 3, [HIP] Press Release, 15 January 1937.

2. For a detailed discussion of the formulation and administration of the housing policy dimension of the Home Improvement Plan, see John C. Bacher, “Keeping to the Private Market: The Evolution of Canadian Housing Policy: 1900-1949” (Ph.D. Thesis, McMaster University, 1985), pp. 181-202.

earner could modernize his house and thus also protect his investment. In addition, the Home Improvement Plan presupposed and worked to further entrench existing gender divisions in Canadian society. In the context of social attitudes and policies that discriminated against all women in relief provisions and against married women in paid work other than domestic labour,³ it is no coincidence that the HIP planners considered women only in their capacity as dependent home workers. The plan represents one facet of the state's increasing involvement in defining what constitutes a proper home as well as in designating the proper roles and relations between and among family members. Formulated in a climate of opinion which scapegoated women for unemployment, especially married women,⁴ the Plan is also an example of the way governments have attempted to ameliorate economic dislocation at the expense of women's autonomy in the family and the work force.⁵

Modeled on Title One of the U.S. Federal Housing Act of 1934 and building on many local initiatives to generate employment by stimulating the building trades,⁶ the Canadian Home Improvement scheme offered loans on favourable terms to property owners for the modernization and repair of their homes. Although intended above all for urban single-family homes, farm houses, duplexes and small apartment buildings also qualified. The interest on repayment was set at only 6.32 percent, a rate lower than that offered through the American plan and considerably lower than the average charged by Canadian finance companies of the time (12 and 14 percent for purchases bought on the instalment plan). The money was to be repaid within three years for a loan of \$1,000 or less and within five for larger amounts up to a fixed maximum of \$2,000 (later \$3,000). Improvements possible under the Plan included surface changes like wall papering, repainting (interior and exterior), refacing clapboard with brick, stone or stucco, and plaster walls with wood panelling, replacing or repairing roofs and eavestroughing, repointing chimneys, and laying new floors. Loan recipients could also make structural changes like enlarging rooms, reclaiming unused basements, converting attics into bedrooms, building in cupboards, closets, bookcases and kitchen counters, installing new piping, wiring, heating and air conditioning systems, and insulation, erecting garages or fences, and altering windows. Under the Plan appliances could be purchased only if they constituted permanent not moveable fixtures, i.e., toilets but not shower curtains, kitchen sinks but not refrigerators, flooring but not rugs.⁷ The fears of home-owners that utilizing the Plan would cause property taxes to skyrocket were put to rest by municipalities' agreeing not to increase assessments on HIP-improved

3. See Marjorie Cohen, "Women at Work in Canada During the Depression," unpublished paper presented at the Blue Collar Workers' Conference, Windsor, May 1979; and Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd. 1988), pp. 46-47.

4. See, for example, the anonymous letter to R.B. Bennett dated 8 November 1934, PAC, Bennett Papers, MG 26 K, Vol. 790, Reel M-1447, pp. 486574-77, and the mention of Montreal Mayor Houde's discriminatory solution to male unemployment in PAC, Montreal Council of Women Papers, MG 28 I 164, Vol. 5, file: Annual Reports, *Forty-First Year Book and Annual Report 1934-35*, p. 23.

5. Ruth Roach Pierson with Marjorie Cohen, "Government Job-Training Programs for Women, 1937-1947," in Ruth Roach Pierson, *"They're Still Women After All": The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986), pp. 62-94.

6. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3355, file 3, "Address of H.A. McLarty at Banquet of the Association of Ontario Architects," Windsor, Ontario, 17 October 1936; Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 18 January 1937, p. 20.

7. H.R. Robinson, "Fifty Millions for Modernization," *Canadian Homes and Gardens*, December 1935, p. 17; Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 18 January 1937, p. 20; *Labour Gazette*, May 1937, p. 502; Canada Statutes, *An Act to increase Employment by encouraging the Repair of rural and urban Homes*, 1 Geo. VI (1937), chap. 11.

houses.⁸ The plan did not speak to the basic need for shelter of the destitute homeless or of those in want of low-rental housing. These housing concerns were addressed, albeit inadequately, by the other major federal government housing initiatives of the Depression, the Dominion Housing Act (DHA) of 1935 and the National Housing Act (NHA) of 1938.⁹

Co-operative agreements between Canadian financial institutions and the Dominion government underwrote both the HIP and the DHA/NHA. Fifty million dollars were made available for HIP loans in exchange for the federal government's promise to guarantee chartered banks and other approved lending institutions against losses of up to 15 percent of the aggregate amount. The total for which the Canadian government might be out of pocket was thus set at \$7,500,000.¹⁰ Certain lending institutions, like Heating and Plumbing Finance, Limited, which were affiliated with building supply firms, gained government approval to operate alongside the banks as lending institutions under the Home Improvement scheme.¹¹ In addition, some building and plumbing suppliers developed their own instalment buying plans, like Crane's "New Budget Plan" which promised "the same low rates of interest as the Government Plan."¹² Necessarily, loans negotiated directly with a building firm could not be 'squandered' on 'luxuries' and other items that did not qualify under the Plan, as some conservatives, suspicious of the spending habits of government aid recipients, feared might happen with money borrowed from banks.¹³

The Home Improvement Plan was billed as the saviour of the building trades which, as one early HIP Press Release stated, "have tossed helplessly in the doldrums"¹⁴ for over six years. Moreover, regarding the building trades as a pivotal industry, policy makers assumed that recovery in this sector would stimulate economic recovery more generally.¹⁵ Many shared that belief. Indeed, Gordon S. Harrington of the NEC announced in his February 1937 radio address to the nation that "when the building trades are busy the benefits spread very widely throughout the whole country."¹⁶ The Trades and Labour Congress agreed that stimulating the building trades would act as a stimulus to the economy generally.¹⁷ According to *Maclean's*, "activity in the building trades" would mean "an increased demand for a long list of materials with consequent benefit to those engaged in

8. Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 1 February 1937, pp. 467-68; "The Home Improvement Plan," editorial, *The Labour Leader* (Toronto), 23 April 1937, p. 2.

9. J. David Hulchanski, "The 1935 Dominion Housing Act: Setting the Stage for a Permanent Federal Presence in Canada's Housing Sector," *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine* XV, 1 (June/juin 1986): 19-39; Wm. L. Best, "National Housing Act," *Canadian Congress Journal* XVII, 11 (November 1938): 18-20; John C. Bacher, "Canadian Housing 'Policy' in Perspective," *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine* XV, 1 (June/juin 1986): 3-18.

10. *Profit for You from the Home Improvement Plan* (Ottawa: National Employment Commission, December 1936), p. 7. Copy at PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3364, file 1.

11. "Is yours a 1918 1928 1938 home?" *Canadian Homes and Gardens*, June 1938, p. 11; Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 2 February 1937, pp. 484-85.

12. *Maclean's*, 15 January 1937, p. 35.

13. Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 2 February 1937, pp. 496-97.

14. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3347, file 4, Press Release #5, "Statement by Arthur B. Purvis, Chairman, National Employment Commission, on the Improvement Plan," 2 November 1936.

15. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 13, "A British Building Society for Canada, 1936"; Vol. 3347, file 4, Press Release #10, 12 November 1937; Vol. 3366, file 10, Press Release #156, "A Year of the Home Improvement Plan."

16. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3347, file 5, Radio Address by Hon. Gordon S. Harrington, 12 February 1937.

17. "The Home Improvement Plan—A National Co-operative Effort," *Canadian Congress Journal* XV, 11 (November 1936): 27.

their manufacture and production.”¹⁸ The list included the lumber industry, paint companies, building trades suppliers, the manufacturers of bathroom fixtures and linoleum and the makers of air conditioning units. Employment would also be generated for electricians, plumbers, carpenters, house painters, roofers, masons and bricklayers, as well as certain professionals like domestic architects and engineers.¹⁹ Furthermore, its benefits would not be limited to one locale. As the NEC boasted, “the beauty of the Plan is that it creates opportunities for employment in every nook and corner of the country.”²⁰ Promoters cited U.S. statistics demonstrating that in some communities hundreds of jobs were created almost overnight and relief rolls were substantially cut within days of the Plan’s introduction.²¹ They also claimed, on the basis of American estimates, that seventy-five to eighty-five percent of the money spent on home improvement would go to labour in the form of wages.²² On the strength of this promise of job creation, the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada officially endorsed the Plan in December 1936.²³

The expected boost to employment was tied to the further expectation that the Plan would create an atmosphere of business confidence in which lending institutions would free up credit to the general public, and the general public would be encouraged to spend. U.S. studies estimated that total expenditures on home improvement could exceed amounts borrowed by as much as 3 or 4 to 1.²⁴ Armed with this information, Harrington assured his radio audience that in the U.S. “for every \$1.00 borrowed from the Banks there were some \$3.00 used for the same purpose by persons who did not have to borrow.”²⁵ The NEC assured businessmen that the Home Improvement Plan was not primarily intended “to get people to borrow money,” but “to SPEND money.”²⁶ HIP was expected to stimulate the circulation of money as “idle men in the building industry are returned to work and renew their lost purchasing power.”²⁷ The NEC relied on the momentum of friendly neighbourhood competition and a ‘keeping up with the Jones’ mentality to spark a frenzy of clean-up and repair. Commissioners expected that home improvements financed by one home-owner through the HIP would trigger a chain reaction down the street as one neighbour after another compared his or her house to the renovated one next door.²⁸ “Thousands,” they believed, “who did not require loans would fall in line with their neighbors”.²⁹ It was also hoped that even those who took out loans would end up making

18. “A Job in Your Home,” *Maclean's*, 15 November 1936, p. 4.

19. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3355, file 3, “Address of H.A. McLarty,” 17 October 1936; Vol. 3347, file 4, Press Release #10, 12 November 1936.

20. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #68, Speech by E.J. Young (NEC) at Opening of HIP Exhibition, Toronto, 4 May 1937.

21. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3355, file 3, “Home Repairs Can Begin at Once,” *Evening Citizen* (Ottawa), 19 October 1936. According to James Struthers, “the NEC knew that 13% of employable males on relief were in construction and 32% were general labourers.” James Struthers, *No Fault of Their Own: Unemployment and the Canadian Welfare State 1914-1941* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), p. 155.

22. Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 18 January 1937, p. 20; PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3355, file 3, “Address of H.A. McLarty”; *Profit for You from the Home Improvement Plan*, p. 4.

23. “Canadian Labour Organizations Present Memoranda of Proposed Legislation to the Dominion Government,” *Labour Gazette*, January 1937, p. 39.

24. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3347, file 4, Press Release #1, “House Renovation Scheme”, for release in the morning papers on Saturday 17 October 1936; file 4, Press Release #10, 12 November 1936.

25. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3347, file 5, Radio Address by Hon. Gordon S. Harrington, 12 February 1937.

26. *Profit for You*, p. 7.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

28. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3347, file 4, Press Release #10, 12 November 1936.

29. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3347, file 4, Press Release #1, “House Renovation Scheme,” for release in morning papers of Saturday, 17 October 1936.

more changes than they had originally anticipated. These people would likely dig into their own savings to finance the further alterations.³⁰

The Home Improvement Plan was to straighten out a tangle of related problems: unemployment, tight credit, consumer parsimony and deteriorating property. Windsor, the site of the HIP pilot project, had been very hard hit by the Depression. Because of the collapse of the automotive industry, unemployment there was so severe that residents defaulted on their taxes and the city in turn “defaulted on its bond interest.” Lending institutions and insurance companies refused to loan; credit dried up; and house construction, repair and renovation ground to a halt. While extremely acute in Windsor, the adverse effects of unemployment and tight credit on residential property could be seen in many other localities across Canada. “For six years,” the National Employment Commission advised, “Canadians, thousands of them, have been living in rundown, drab, shabby homes,” having to watch “their property deteriorate . . . because they could not, or in some cases would not . . . finance needed repairs and improvements.”³¹

In the minds of the National Employment Commissioners and members of the federal government more generally, the state of the nation’s homes was a measure of the prosperity of the nation: rundown homes reflected a rundown economy. This view derived from an underlying commitment to private property and property owners. Implicitly the NEC and government subscribed to the opinion advanced by one spokesman for the building trades “that the best type of citizen is the one who owns his own home.”³² Certainly the Commission regarded the individually-owned home as the cornerstone of the nation. In the words of Arthur B. Purvis, NEC chairman, the home was “the beginning of the nation,” and “the national structure” was “erected on homes.”³³

Having come to power in 1935 on the heels of the Bennett government, Prime Minister Mackenzie King was under considerable pressure both to appease the unemployed and to allay property owners’ fears of social unrest. One of the first acts of the new government was the appointment of the National Employment Commission, whose mandate was to investigate unemployment and make recommendations to the Prime Minister. King, reluctant to further the federal government’s involvement in direct relief, willingly embraced the NEC’s proposal for job creation through the Home Improvement scheme.³⁴ On 9 September 1936, King announced that the necessary legislation would be passed at the next session of Parliament. In the meantime, a pre-legislation agreement was worked out with lending institutions allowing the Plan to be launched by November, five months ahead of the passage of the Home Improvement Loans Guarantee Act which did not receive royal assent until 31 March 1937.³⁵ It was believed that urgent action was required in order to avoid the violence and disruption of previous winters, especially that of 1933-34.

30. *Ibid.*

31. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3347, file 4, Press Release #5, “Statement by Arthur B. Purvis,” 2 November 1936; Press Release #10, 12 November 1936.

32. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 13, “A British Building Society for Canada, 1936.”

33. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3347, file 5, “Speech of Arthur B. Purvis....Over a National Network, March 25th, 1937.”

34. Struthers, *No Fault of Their Own*, p. 157.

35. Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 29 January 1937, p. 388; “Labour Legislation Enacted by the Parliament of Canada and the Legislatures of Ontario and Manitoba in 1937,” *Labour Gazette*, May 1937, p. 502.

The government felt that mere word of the Plan could act as “a barrage against [winter] riots.”³⁶ A special effort was made to put announcements into the foreign language press “in view of the possibility of riots which may arise through non-English speaking people, or at least with their cooperation.”³⁷ Indeed, officials were particularly fearful of the activities and influence of certain ethnic groups, such as the Finns and the Ukrainians, who were known to be well represented in the Communist Party of Canada.³⁸

The Home Improvement Plan was especially appealing to King because it rested on a philosophy of “voluntary corporatism.”³⁹ In reaction to the radical left’s advocacy of class struggle as the vehicle for social change, the corporatist vision assumed that competing segments of society — identified by King as capital, labour, management and the community — could and should pull together for the common good. In the post-war decades, not just government, but businessmen, conservative labour unions and social organizations commonly subscribed to this “co-operative” philosophy. In his endorsement of the HIP, for instance, the President of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada acclaimed it as “non-partisan” and “confined to no class or calling.”⁴⁰ Also engaged in the corporatist discourse, the anti-Left *Labour Leader* of Toronto urged labour organizations to support the HIP in order to demonstrate that all “legitimate trade unions can and do participate in constructive and practical work for the general welfare of all.”⁴¹

No doubt King and his Party were also pleased by the knowledge that the Plan required few direct government expenditures, beyond its promise to cover a portion of the banks’ losses in case of loan default. According to E.J. Young of the NEC, clearly a pre-Keynesian, government spending could not possibly solve the problem of unemployment anyway, because governments did not have any money apart from what they collected from the people.⁴² Leonard C. Marsh, the democratic socialist Director of the McGill Social Science Research Project, astutely faulted the National Employment Commission Reports for only appearing to be Keynesian in their encouragement of pump priming while, in fact, prescribing stimulation to the economy that was dependent on private not public investment, as in the case of the Home Improvement Plan.⁴³ In addition to those of pre-Keynesian convictions, the Plan was also attractive to members of government and their advisors who were opposed on principle to giving money directly to the poor, lest it foster a dependency

36. PAC, RG 27, Vol 3355, file 3, HIP Press Release, “For Release in Morning Papers of Saturday, 17 October 1936”; file 3, “Outline of Plan for Promoting and Popularizing the Home Improvement Plan,” p. 1. Note that the Bennett Government’s Dominion Housing Act of 1935 which was to stimulate new house construction and home ownership also seems to have been motivated more by “the need to speed up house building as a strategy to stifle unrest among the unemployed than it was with the need to improve housing conditions.” Michael Audain, “Transforming Housing into a Social Service,” *Plan Canada* 13, 2 (August 1973), p. 95.

37. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3355, file 3, “Outline of Plan for Promoting and Popularizing the Home Improvement Plan”.

38. Ivan Avakumovic, *The Communist Party in Canada: A History* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), p. 35; William Rodney, *Soldiers of the International: A History of the Communist Party of Canada 1919-29* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), pp. 35, 41, 68, 81, 85.

39. Bacher, pp. 179-80, 184, 185, 187, 199. On King’s liberal corporatist thought as articulated in his 1918 work, *Industry and Humanity*, see Reginald Whitaker, “The Liberal Corporatist Ideas of Mackenzie King,” *Labour/Le Travailleur* 2 (1977): 164-69.

40. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3347, file 5, Press Release #37.

41. “Get it Done Now!” *Labour Leader* (Toronto), 12 March 1937, p. 1.

42. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #68, Speech by E.J. Young, 4 May 1937, p. 1.

43. Leonard C. Marsh, “Reports of the National Employment Commission,” *Canadian Journal of Economics & Political Science* 5 (1939): 83.

mentality or outright irresponsibility. Furthermore, the scheme had the added advantage of channelling “relief” to the unemployed through the respectable, responsible, propertied segment of society. It located the potential for economic recovery within the property-owning class.⁴⁴ Perhaps alluding to the limited success of the Dominion Housing Act of 1935,⁴⁵ Young asserted that to “build new houses for all who need them is out of the question. The country cannot afford it.”⁴⁶ Instead, the HIP would prompt people to spend their own money directly. One advertising notice spoke of “bringing together the houses that needed repair and the men who are anxious to repair them.”⁴⁷ “It would be possible,” observed Young, “for the Government to put all the men in Canada to work at some useless task — such, for instance, as bailing the water out of Lake Ontario and pouring it back in again.”⁴⁸ The Home Improvement Plan, in contrast, would involve the unemployed in work that was socially valuable.

While the propertyless and the jobless were to benefit from increased employment opportunities, they were not eligible for loans. Indeed, as over half of urban householders were not home-owners, they were ruled out from the start.⁴⁹ Moreover, from the first press release, issued on 17 October 1936, it was made clear that those without a steady and substantial income were not invited to apply.⁵⁰ Officials and loan companies further specified that applicants must demonstrate “moral worth.”⁵¹ Sometimes referred to as “character loans,”⁵² they were advertised as requiring no other security “behind the note” than “the man’s character and his earning capacity.”⁵³ Although good character in the first instance was defined in terms of financial security and responsibility, bank forms generally extended the concept to include conformity with prevailing norms of marriage and the family. The premium placed on stability in marital relations, employment and residency was intended to weed out the unmarried and the transient.⁵⁴

Just as the poverty-stricken were not to be the direct beneficiaries of the Plan, neither were the nation’s wealthy.⁵⁵ In fact the Plan was seldom mentioned, either by writers or advertisers, in upper-class magazines like *Canadian Homes and Gardens*. In a radio address of early 1937, Purvis identified the main target group as “ordinary credit-worthy owner[s]

44. The proportion of Canadian households that were owner-occupied in 1931 was 60.5 percent overall: 45.6 percent of urban households, 78.8 percent of rural. Richard Harris “Home Ownership and Class in Modern Canada,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 10, 1 (1986), Table 2. But, according to James Lemon, citing John T. Saywell (“Housing Canadians: Essays on the History of Residential Construction in Canada,” Economic Council of Canada, Discussion Paper No. 24 (Ottawa, 1975), pp. 150-69), the proportion of owner-occupied households dropped from about 60 percent to about 50 percent between 1931 and 1941. J. Lemon, *Toronto Since 1918: An Illustrated History* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, Publishers, and National Museum of Man, National Museums of Canada, 1985), pp. 65, 67.

45. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3347, file 5, Speech of Arthur B. Purvis, 25 March 1937, p. 2. The DHA assisted only 2.7 percent of housing starts in 1937 and 4.5 percent in 1938, according to Michael Audain, p. 95.

46. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #68, Speech by E.J. Young, 4 May 1937, p. 1.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

49. See above note 42.

50. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3347, file 4, Press Release #1.

51. Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 29 January 1937, p. 394.

52. *Maclean’s*, 15 November 1936, p. 4.

53. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #68. Speech by E.J. Young, p.2

54. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3355, file 7, “Applications for Home Improvement Loan.”

55. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3347, file 5, Press Release #23; Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 2 February 1937, p. 497.

of residential property.”⁵⁶ A broad middle class was included in this category, but so was a portion of the working class. In a move to attract the stable upper-working-class homeowner, HIP advertising strategists spoke of using the image of “the humble cottage,” rather than that of the baronial mansion, and of showing what a difference a few low-cost home improvements could make.⁵⁷ Fully 37.6 percent of urban working-class households in 1931 owned their own homes — although in decline by 1937, still a sizeable group of potential HIP borrowers.⁵⁸ How many of these could have afforded going into debt to improve their houses is another question. At a strategy meeting of government and industry representatives in December 1936, it was suggested that some proportion of the ads should appeal to those making between \$1,200 and \$1,400 a year.⁵⁹ Most working-class families were situated well below this income bracket and would therefore not have qualified financially for HIP loans. Moreover, some contemporary critics, like Alan Dunlop in the *Canadian Forum*, argued that HIP would be affordable only to those who earned enough to pay income tax, that is, single persons earning over \$1,000 per annum and married couples with incomes over \$2,000. Dunlop estimated that only 7.5 percent of all Canadian households would fall into that category.⁶⁰ As no statistics are available to show the distribution of loans by income, it is impossible to determine the number of loans made to working-class homeowners. We do know, however, that before the Plan expired on October 30, 1940, the 125,652 loans approved comprised only about 10 percent of the total number of owner-occupied households.⁶¹ Clearly, only the highest echelons of the working class could have been represented among them.

In Parliament when the HIP bill was debated, several members attacked the Plan’s exclusionary nature.⁶² Moreover, J.R. MacNicol worried that many working-class families who *were* eligible would nonetheless find it impossible to pay back the money. He was thinking of a particular worker, thrifty and steadily employed for ten months of the year at \$28 a week, who was hoping to borrow \$750. How, MacNicol challenged, could this ordinary working-class home-owner possibly afford to repay an annual total of \$250 for three years, as required, on his yearly income of \$1,120?⁶³ In fact, the majority of loans would turn out to be considerably smaller, except in the wealthier communities such as St. Hyacinthe and Outremont where, by the end of 1937, loans were not numerous but their average size was \$1,013 and \$799 respectively.⁶⁴ Throughout the duration of the Plan,

56. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3347, file 5, Speech of Arthur B. Purvis, 25 March 1937, p. 2.

57. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #120; Vol. 3355, file 3, Minutes of Meeting at Cockfield, Brown & Co. Ltd., 8 December 1936, p. 4.

58. In comparison, approximately 51.7 percent of urban middle- and upper-class households owned their own homes in 1931. Calculated from Harris, Table 5. See above, note 42.

59. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3355, file 3, Minutes of Meeting at Cockfield, Brown & Co. Ltd., 8 December 1936.

60. Alan Dunlop, “Home Improvement Plan — a Mouse?” *Canadian Forum* XVI, 192 (January 1937): 21. A 1935 study of wage-earning households in Montreal, where wages and home ownership rates were among the lowest in urban Canada, found that 67.9 percent had annual incomes under \$1,000 (almost 20 percent earned less than \$650), leaving just 32.1 percent of working-class households in the \$1,000 to \$1,500 category. The Research Committee of the League for Social Responsibility, *Social Planning for Canada*, with an introduction by F.R. Scott, Leonard Marsh *et al.*, (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1975), p. 11; first published in 1935. The report cited was *A Report on Housing and Slum Clearance for Montreal*, by a Joint Committee of the Montreal Board of Trade and the City Improvement League, March 1935.

61. Calculated from *Canada Year Book*, 1941, p. 371, and 1936, pp. 138-39.

62. Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 2 February, 1937, pp. 469-76.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 472.

64. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3370, Press release #178.

Table 1 Home Improvement Plan Loans by Province, 1938-40*

	1937		1938		1939		1940		Total 1937-40	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Ontario	12,875	43.0	13,501	48.4	17,836	50.4	16,138	49.8	60,350	48.0
Quebec	4,604	15.4	4,271	15.3	5,479	15.5	4,187	12.9	18,541	14.7
Manitoba	2,001	6.7	1,598	5.7	2,291	6.5	2,236	6.9	8,126	6.5
Saskatchewan	813	2.7	424	1.5	528	1.5	617	1.9	2,382	1.9
Alberta	2,318	7.7	1,987	7.1	2,610	7.4	2,636	8.1	9,551	7.6
British Columbia	3,218	10.7	2,871	10.3	2,994	8.5	3,670	11.3	12,753	10.1
Nova Scotia	2,489	8.3	2,072	7.4	2,132	6.0	1,777	5.5	8,470	6.7
New Brunswick	1,266	4.2	992	3.5	1,194	3.4	920	2.8	4,372	3.5
Prince Edward Island	379	1.3	198	0.7	310	0.9	220	0.7	1,107	0.9
Total	29,963		27,914		35,374		32,401		125,652	

* Years ending in October.

Source: *Canada Year Book*, 1941, p. 371.

Table 2 Amount (in dollars) Borrowed Under the Home Improvement Plan Loans by Province, 1938-40*

	1937		1938		1939		1940		Total 1937-40	
	Amount	%	Amount	%	Amount	%	Amount	%	Amount	%
Ontario	5,027,332	42.9	5,785,448	50.6	7,455,583	51.0	5,807,931	47.4	24,076,294	48.2
Quebec	2,286,198	19.5	2,182,004	19.0	2,828,123	19.4	2,042,116	16.7	9,338,441	18.7
Manitoba	757,542	6.5	617,339	5.4	954,661	6.5	868,168	7.0	3,197,710	6.4
Saskatchewan	285,848	2.4	137,000	1.2	214,960	1.5	266,672	2.2	904,480	1.8
Alberta	1,000,672	8.5	862,262	7.5	1,104,399	7.6	1,197,848	9.8	4,165,181	8.3
British Columbia	1,044,974	8.9	864,294	7.6	955,201	6.5	1,161,351	9.5	4,025,820	8.0
Nova Scotia	779,017	6.6	609,070	5.3	635,237	4.3	569,779	4.6	2,593,103	5.2
New Brunswick	435,707	3.7	322,657	2.8	380,210	2.6	283,004	2.3	1,421,578	2.8
Prince Edward Island	103,839	0.9	49,607	0.4	63,542	0.4	51,025	0.4	268,013	0.5
Total	11,721,129		11,429,681		14,591,916		12,247,894		49,990,620	

* Years ending in October.

Source: *Canada Year Book*, 1941, p. 371.

amounts borrowed averaged under \$400 in most provinces, about \$500 in Quebec.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, MacNicol's concern was not unwarranted. Studies estimated the cost of living (which dropped significantly during the Depression) at varying amounts, generally ranging from \$910 to \$1,456 a year.⁶⁶ Allowing for the fact that many working-class families had more than one breadwinner, it is still apparent that none but the wealthiest workers could afford to repay even an average sized loan. In implicit recognition of this, the National Employment Commission placed an HIP advertisement in the *Canadian Congress Journal*, urging members of the Trades and Labour Council of Canada:

If you have a steady job and own your own home which needs repairs or alterations, negotiate a loan yourself and help spread prosperity among less fortunate workers.⁶⁷

In various ways, then, the HIP worked to differentiate between strata of the working class: between the respectable and the unrespectable, the stable and the unstable, those who owned property and earned a solid income and those who did not, those who found repayment affordable and those who found it difficult or impossible.

The Plan also worked to differentiate between the sexes. "Canada is a land of many home owners," proclaimed one NEC press release. The 1931 census had recorded close to one and a half million — almost all of whom were assumed by HIP promoters and bankers to be male.⁶⁸ Very rarely did a press release even acknowledge the existence of a female home-owner.⁶⁹ For all intents and purposes, a basic characteristic of the "credit-worthy home-owner" was a male identity. In his endorsement of the Home Improvement Plan, the President of the Canadian Manufacturers' Association explained that under the HIP

the credit-worthy home-owner finds *his* path, formerly strewn with financial difficulties, clear and direct. *He* decides what improvements *his* home requires, *he* finds out their cost and *he* applies for a loan from the bank. *He* can make his application with no feeling of hesitancy. The banks have agreed to co-operate, and if *he* can show that *he* will be able to meet the installment payments, the loan should be made.⁷⁰

Advertisers typically referred to "Mr. Home-Owner and his wife."⁷¹ Women were thus situated, by and large, in an indirect relation to the Plan; it was chiefly as dependants of men, not as home-owners or labour force participants, that they were to benefit. After all, the loans themselves were to go to men and the employment to be generated was located in male-dominated job sectors.

Nonetheless, women were cast as central to the Plan's successful functioning. Mary Sutherland, the only woman member of the NEC, acclaimed the Plan as "one occasion when a government has legislated right into women's hands along [the] lines of women's most serious interest."⁷² That statement was premised on the relegation of women to the roles of homemaker and consumer. As production moved from home to factory, the work

65. Calculated from *Canada Year Book*, 1941, p. 371.

66. The \$910 figure was an "emergency budget" determined by the Montreal Council of Social Agencies in 1933, while the \$1,456 estimate was worked out by a Toronto study on relief allowances. Struthers, p. 122.

67. *Canadian Congress Journal* XVI, 4 & 5 (April and May 1937): p. 1.

68. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3347, file 5, Press Release # 23.

69. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #83.

70. Our emphasis. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #45.

71. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3347, file 5, Unnumbered Press Release.

72. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #27, 22 February [1937].

of housewives shifted from production to consumption. The 1920s witnessed the triumph of the mass media and capitalism's investment in mass consumerism, promoted through mass advertising, as the basis for the mass production of new domestic technologies.⁷³ Concomitantly, consumer credit institutions emerged to encourage buying on the instalment plan. By the late 1920s U.S. and Canadian advertisers were basing their marketing techniques on studies which claimed that women were responsible for 80-85 percent of a family's household expenditures.⁷⁴ Convinced that women were the managers of most household finances, consumer credit companies, like the Central Finance Corporation of Toronto, produced a series of "Better Buymanship" booklets advising women on how and what to buy.⁷⁵ So influential a role were women seen to play in the spending of the family dollars, that each local advisory committee — established to publicize and implement Canada's Home Improvement Plan — was urged either to strike a women's sub-committee or to include representatives from local women's organizations on the other sub-committees, i.e., publicity, finance and trouble-shooting.⁷⁶

While the first step to introducing the Plan had been to win the co-operation of banks and other lending institutions, its implementation also depended on the involvement of those businesses and unions whose interests would be served and on utilization of the most up-to-date advertising techniques. The Plan would operate as an example of voluntary corporatism in action. The National Employment Commission hired Cockfield, Brown and Company, a prestigious Canadian ad agency, to coordinate the advertising campaign.⁷⁷ Finance Minister Charles Dunning explained to Parliament that HIP publicity costs would be financed not by the government "but by private funds raised from public-spirited citizens and business interests who expect to benefit from the expenditure involved."⁷⁸ To raise contributions from private industry for an estimated advertising budget of \$466,000.00, Cockfield, Brown and Company contacted large corporations, like Imperial Oil, Canadian General Electric, Westinghouse, and Dominion Oilcloth & Linoleum, the major department stores, and four large banks and six smaller lending institutions, as well as a long list of suppliers for the building trades.⁷⁹ From these funds, Cockfield, Brown and Company produced a run of over one hundred press releases, issued to all major media, as well as a series of NEC-sponsored ads trumpeting the features of the HIP, for placement in newspapers, magazines, and special-interest journals.⁸⁰

73. Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods and Cities* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1982), Part VI.

74. Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1976), p. 167; Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 167.

75. Six titles were available by 1936: 1. *Eggs, Meat and Poultry*; 2. *Silk, Synthetic Fibres and Silk Stockings*; 3. *Fruit and Vegetables, Canned and Fresh*; 4. *Sheets, Flannelette Blankets, Table Linen and Towels*; 5. *Floor Coverings*; 6. *Dairy Products*. Listed in *Money Management* (Toronto: Central Finance Corporation, 1936), copy at PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3350, file 18.

76. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3355, file 3, "Local Advisory Committees. Some Suggestions for their Organization".

77. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3355, file 3. Minutes of Meeting at Cockfield, Brown and Co., p. 5.

78. Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, February 2, 1937, p. 467.

79. Bacher, "Keeping to the Private Market," p. 189.

80. See, for example, "H.I.P. means work for YOU," *Canadian Congress Journal* XVI, 4 & 5 (April and May 1937), 1; "Magic!...The Home Improvement Plan," *Maclean's*, 1 October 1937, p. 31, and *Chatelaine*, October 1937, p. 72; "Magic! with the Home Improvement Pan," *Canadian Congress Journal* XVI, 11 (October 1937), 1; "Magie! ... quelques dollars suffisent à transformer votre maison!," *La Revue Populaire*, octobre 1937, p. 62.

Moreover, the NEC produced a brochure entitled *Profit for You from the Home Improvement Plan*, designed to encourage businesses to promote their own products under the HIP banner as well as to get involved in the general promotion of the HIP. NEC offered free of charge to manufacturers, dealers, and lending institutions an official Home Improvement Plan emblem for use in the advertising of their products and services. In addition, NEC made available proof sheets of model ad layouts to "every newspaper in the country" to show firms how they might piggyback their own advertising on the promotion of the government Home Improvement Plan.⁸¹

According to the HIP organizational chart drawn up by Cockfield, Brown and Company, the network for promotion and implementation would stretch out from the NEC in Ottawa, east and west across the country through nation-wide businesses, lending institutions, and HIP provincial chairmen appointed by the NEC, down to the local participating businesses and the local HIP advisory committees and sub-committees in individual towns and communities. The advertising campaign would thereby hit Canadians at every turn, making use of urban and rural newspapers, including the foreign-language press, magazines, farm publications, booklets, billboards, posters, radio spots, window displays, street car signs, and movie trailers.⁸² In co-operation with the NEC's bid for support from the housewives of Canada, *Chatelaine*, for example, declared "1937 — HOME IMPROVEMENT YEAR" on the cover of its January issue and announced a \$25 prize every month beginning in March "for the best example of home improvements submitted" to *Chatelaine's* "Home Improvement Contest."⁸³

The "Outline of Plan for Promoting and Popularizing the Home Improvement Plan" urged the adoption of an aggressive advertising campaign which was to become "the weapon with which each member of our organization is armed."⁸⁴ Two months after the Plan was put into operation some manufacturers were praised for their initiative in sending their employees "around the city, making notes of homes that need improvements," and then "approaching these prospects with suggestions."⁸⁵ Later a special press release, aimed at contractors, chastised them for being too passive in their approach. The techniques of the car salesman were held up for emulation.⁸⁶

The potential of photography was exploited in much of the publicity. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, photography was replacing drawings and paintings for advertising illustration, partly because it was cheaper, but also because it was thought to convey "a literal matter-of-fact realism." Photographers, however, like other illustrators and the advertisers who hired them, were aware of their role as manipulators of images and, through those, the public.⁸⁷ One manipulatory technique in photography's bag of tricks was the

81. *Profit for You from the Home Improvement Plan* (Ottawa: National Employment Commission, December 1936), pp. 15, 10. Copy at PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3364, file 1.

82. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3355, file 3, "Outline of Plan for Promoting and Popularizing the Home Improvement Plan."

83. *Chatelaine*, January 1937, front cover and p. 35.

84. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3355, file 3, "Outline of Plan for Promoting and Popularizing the Home Improvement Plan," p. 6.

85. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3355, file 3, "Minutes of Meeting at Cockfield, Brown and Co.," 8 December 1936, p. 5.

86. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3347, file 5, Press Release #59.

87. Marchand, p. 149.

capacity for taking 'before' and 'after' shots and displaying them side by side. Much favoured by advertisers in general,⁸⁸ the tactic was seized upon by HIP promoters.⁸⁹

A powerful sales pitch was made by glorifying "the modern." Architects and interior designers, committed to the principles of streamlining, were fond of declaring that "Modernization is in the air these days."⁹⁰ By the late 1920s and early 1930s, the vocabulary and precepts of the international movement in architecture and design, spearheaded most notably by the Bauhaus in Weimar Germany, were influencing North American concepts of modernity. In his article "Modern Style", architect Evan Parry helped to popularize one of the most fundamental ideals of the Bauhaus school, that of bringing form and function into perfect harmony.⁹¹ Sharing the Bauhaus preoccupation with applying the methods and materials of the industrial age to the design of buildings and their contents, a pursuit inseparable from rationalization and standardization, Parry lauded new structures which were "simple, utilitarian, ... efficient," and "devoid of the frills which delighted past generations."⁹²

Building on the 1920s love affair with the concept of modernity and its elevation by advertisers to the status of a supreme value, HIP promoters held up modernization as the path of escape from the Depression. "Modernization" became the synonym for home improvement. HIP loans were called "modernization loans."⁹³ For economy's sake, Canadians were advised to write away to the Canadian Institute of Plumbing and Heating for the free-of-charge booklets *How to Modernize Your Heating Equipment* and *How to Modernize Your Plumbing Equipment*.⁹⁴ One ad, sporting the HIP logo, asked "...have you MONEY TO BURN?" and warned "Don't let the worn-out FURNACE keep you poor!"⁹⁵ A link was made between increasing the property value of one's home, putting men to work, and keeping up-to-date. Warning that the market value of "a down-at-heel property" was "considerably lessened," Gertrude Crawford's 1936 *Maclean's* article "It Pays to Modernize" gave advice on how best to make use of HIP loans. Instructing readers that "pride of ownership dictates that the house should be brought into line with modern times," she plugged the government's Home Improvement Plan by shaming readers for being old-fashioned. "The fact is," Crawford pronounced, "that the world has moved on

88. See, for example, "You'd Never Know the Old Place NOW!" *Canadian Homes and Gardens*, August 1938, p. 45.

89. Richard, Fisher, "Before/After," *Chatelaine*, March 1937, p. 20; the General Electric ad "The Same Kitchen But What a Difference!" *Chatelaine*, March 1937, p. 3; and the Crane ad, "Avant et après," *La Revue Populaire*, September 1937, p. 33.

90. Norma B. Forbes, "A House Rejuvenated," *Canadian Homes and Gardens*, December 1936, p. 39.

91. "Perhaps the best example of what is being aimed at is found in the design of our grain elevators. In both plan and outward form, their function, or use, is expressed one hundred per cent." Evan Parry, "Modern Style," *Maclean's*, 15 September 1937, p. 24. See, *inter alia*, Walter Gropius, *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus*, trans. by P. Morton Shand (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1965); Marcel Franciscono, *Walter Gropius and the Creation of the BAUHAUS in Weimar: The Ideas and the Artistic Theories of Its Founding Years* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1971), p. 74; and Gillian Naylor, *The Bauhaus Reassessed* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1985).

92. Parry, p. 24; see also Naylor, pp. 9, 36. This development built on a trend toward "minimalist" domestic architecture noticeable in the United States by 1900 and the subject of Chapter 8, "The Minimal House," of Gwendolyn Wright, *Moralism and the Model Home: Domestic Architecture and Cultural Conflict in Chicago, 1873-1913* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 231-53.

93. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #111.

94. *Maclean's*, 15 September 1937, p. 29.

95. *Ibid.*

— industrially, architecturally and decoratively — leaving many old houses old-fashioned or even obsolete, according to present standards.”⁹⁶ On the evening of March 25, 1937, Canadians at home, listening to their radios heard this veiled reproach from Arthur Purvis: “If it were not that I know so well causes which have brought these conditions about, I would say we should be *ashamed* of our homes.”⁹⁷ The device of juxtaposing “before” and “after” photographs or actual house models (as in the 1937 and 1938 CNE Home Improvement Plan exhibits) was intended to make people scrutinize their own homes for any and all antiquated features.⁹⁸

The harmonious fit of form to function that Bauhaus advocated presupposed starting from scratch, rather than adapting an old form to the new ideal. The ultimate Bauhaus goal was, therefore, more fully achievable through the Dominion Housing Act, which provided loans for new house construction, than through the HIP.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, Home Improvement Plan publicity insisted that, with a little “sprucing up,”¹⁰⁰ an old home could become “as modern as tomorrow.”¹⁰¹ To boost its Home Improvement Contest, *Chatelaine* of March 1937 featured a “dramatized presentation” of a “modernized” Winnipeg house. The “almost unbelievable changes” to the exterior were achieved by removing “a dark old veranda,”¹⁰² a bay window and an “ugly oversized dormer,” and adding a “new finish of brick veneer.”¹⁰³ In another *Chatelaine* article, architect Richard A. Fisher condemned the “clumsy front porch” for having “outlived its usefulness” since, with the increased privatization of the home, the backyard had superceded the veranda as the preferred place to sit outside. “So off with the porch!” Fisher decreed.¹⁰⁴ In general, HIP ads advocated the elimination of all Victorian decorative detail. “Trimming may brand the house as of the ‘Gingerbread Period,’” warned one press release. Home-owners were advised to remove exterior trimming if possible, or, if not, to camouflage it by painting it the same colour as the main part of the house.¹⁰⁵ To our contemporary eye, the execution of many of these schemes resulted in the desecration of Canada’s architectural heritage.

Interiors were also to be “stream-lined” and brightened. Above all, the principle of less is more was to guide renovation. “Dressing up a room in this day of simple lines,” said an HIP publicity statement, “frequently means dressing it down.”¹⁰⁶ The living room of the Winnipeg house was completely done over with floor to ceiling drapes, blond maple furniture, indirect lighting, and “soft greys and tones of red.” One of the original “absurdly small windows” on either side of the fireplace had been taken out and the other enlarged.¹⁰⁷ Throughout the house “dark, massive and drab” were outdated; fashionable were bright or off-white walls, “cheery” furniture, and light woodwork.¹⁰⁸

96. *Maclean's*, 1 December 1936, p. 61.

97. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3347, file 5, Speech of Arthur B. Purvis, p. 4.

98. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3355, file 3, “HIP Press Release — 15 January 1937”; Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #128.

99. “DOMINION HOUSING ACT: What it is . . . and what it offers,” *Maclean Building Reports Annual* (1936), p. 51.

100. Gordon Sturrock, “‘Money to Loan,’” *Chatelaine*, November 1936, p. 82.

101. Richard A. Fisher, “Before/After,” *Chatelaine*, March 1937, p. 20.

102. Richard A. Fisher, “Modernizing an Old House,” *Chatelaine*, February 1937, p. 72.

103. Fisher, “Before/After,” p. 20.

104. Richard A. Fisher, “Modernizing the Small House,” *Chatelaine*, April 1937, p. 22.

105. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #120.

106. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #130.

107. Fisher, “Before/After,” p. 20.

108. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3347, file 5, Press Release #40; Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Releases #130, #148, and #154; *Maclean's*, 15 May 1938, inside front cover.

In the Winnipeg house, "exciting things [had] happened below stairs, too." In fact, according to Fisher, the basement showed "the most striking change of all."¹⁰⁹ Gone were the days when the basement was a dingy, "trash-littered"¹¹⁰ "chamber of horrors," harbouring "writhing pipes" and sooty furnaces.¹¹¹ In the era of recreation rooms, General Electric urged Canadian home-owners to use the government Plan to transform their old-fashioned cellars into clean, cheerful rooms,¹¹² where the "imagination may run riot."¹¹³

Although Home Improvement Plan promoters made efforts to draw in the upper working class with assurances that striking alterations need not be costly,¹¹⁴ most of the suggestions featured here were way beyond the budget of ordinary Canadians. Moreover, the total transformation of a house could not even be accomplished within the \$2,000 limit first established by the HIP Act, as *Chatelaine* admitted in reference to the Winnipeg house.¹¹⁵ Despite the NEC's intent to woo the upper working class to the existing system, and in startling contrast to the realities faced by most Canadian urban dwellers, the Winnipeg house, like much HIP promotion, presumed an ideal nuclear family (occasionally compromised by the addition of one grandparent) that was WASP, middle to upper middle class, and composed of 'Mr. Home-Owner', his wife 'Mrs. Consumer', and their two children, a boy and a girl. Similarly the cost-of-living index prepared by the federal Department of Labour posited a standard five person nuclear family. This ideal was also consistently invoked by advocates of a 'family wage' which would allow a male breadwinner to support a dependent wife and three children. The extended family was implicitly excluded from these calculations and arguments. Idealization of the isolated nuclear family, with money to spare, was being marketed at a time when many married women were making ends meet by taking in lodgers¹¹⁶ and recent immigrants were still living in extended family households.¹¹⁷ Although the low prices of the Depression enabled a comfortable few to consume on a scale heretofore unimaginable, and some to afford their first washing machine and live-in hired help, the idealized picture projected by HIP ads ignored the existence of the thousands of Canadians "who lived in shacks, and patched their clothes, and hung around the relief offices, and went to bed hungry."¹¹⁸

Nevertheless, HIP appeals were made to the patriotism and social duty of *all* Canadians. These were predicated on the corporatist belief in the principle of enlightened

109. Fisher, "Before/After," p. 20.

110. "1937 Home Improvement Year," *Chatelaine*, January 1937, p. 41.

111. Fisher, "Modernizing the Small House," p. 23.

112. *Maclean's*, 1 October 1937, p. 25.

113. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3347, file 5, Press Release #34.

114. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #120; Press Release #128.

115. Fisher, "Before/After," p. 20.

116. A crude estimate for the proportion of households with lodgers is one out of five, as in 1931 there were 84,738 lodgers and 417,702 urban households with husband and wife living in owned homes. Calculated from Canada, *Census* 1931, Vol. V, Table 73, p. 1061.

117. Lillian Petroff, "Sojourner and Settler: The Macedonian Presence in the City, 1903-1940," in Robert H. Harney, ed., *Gathering Place: Peoples and Neighbourhoods of Toronto, 1834-1945* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1985), pp. 177-203; Frank Sturino, "The Role of Women in Italian Immigration to the New World," in Jean Burnet, ed., *Looking into My Sister's Eyes: an Exploration in Women's History* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1986), p. 26.

118. L.M. Grayson and Michael Bliss, "Introduction," *The Wretched of Canada*, edited by Grayson and Bliss (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), p. vi.

self-interest, the notion that people, “in helping themselves, . . . are helping others.”¹¹⁹ The President of the Canadian Manufacturers’ Association, for example, saw the very success of the Plan as dependent on harnessing self-interest to patriotism. “National and patriotic motives, as well as self-interest,” he was reported to have said, “should prompt Canadians from coast to coast to support the Home Improvement Plan.”¹²⁰ Its merchandizing compared to the Victory Loan Campaigns of the First World War,¹²¹ the HIP was hailed as “a genuine national community effort,” the largest co-operative endeavour known in Canada during peace time.¹²² “It is said you can’t pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. Perhaps not,” Purvis conceded. “But Canada can pull herself out of this swamp of unemployment and depression by her own co-operative effort.”¹²³ “Co-operation” became another catchword of HIP publicity.¹²⁴ With government, financial institutions, municipalities, chambers of commerce, women’s organizations, service clubs, building associations, “and other social agencies” all working together, King said that the Plan was guaranteed to succeed.¹²⁵ This ideological manipulation of the term “co-operation” papered over the very social rifts that the Plan served to reinforce.

Although many HIP ads were aimed at a female audience, appeals were also made to men. The National Employment Commission, for example, placed several full-page ads in the *Canadian Congress Journal*, organ of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada, advising the male worker, employed or unemployed, that “HIP means work for YOU.”¹²⁶ Other ads focussed on the man as home-owner, appealing to his pride of ownership, his concern to lower house maintenance costs yet protect his property investment, and his commitment to fulfilling his familial responsibilities. The President of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce clearly had men in mind when he said in his endorsement of the HIP: “Unemployment is definitely the responsibility of every citizen, and when *he* improves *his* home, *he* is contributing at least something of benefit to unemployed men.”¹²⁷

The NEC and the business community, however, approached men and women very differently. For instance, a Royal Bank ad for Home Improvement loans, run in the labour and general interest press, showed a young boy gripping an ice cream cone and cheering “Dad’s got a job again!” Stressing the national service performed by HIP borrowers to the alleviation of “Canada’s unemployment problem,” this ad was clearly set up to tug at the heart strings of readers. Attention is drawn to the ice cream cone, a small luxury, perhaps, but only affordable after the boy’s father was given work by the Plan.¹²⁸ The appeal

119. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3355, file 3, “Outline of Plan for Promoting and Popularizing the Home Improvement Plan.”

120. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #45.

121. Bacher, “Keeping to the Private Market,” p. 186.

122. Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 2 February 1937, p. 468; PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3366, file 15, “The Work of Rehabilitation,” Address by Arthur Purvis before the Canadian Club, Toronto, November 29, 1937.

123. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3347, file 4, Press Release #5, “Statement by Arthus B. Purvis.”

124. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3347, file 5, Press Release #37; Bacher, “Keeping to the Private Market,” p. 192.

125. Bacher, “Keeping to the Private Market,” pp. 192-93.

126. *Canadian Congress Journal* XVI, 4 & 5 (April and May 1937):1.

127. Our emphasis, PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #30.

128. *Macleans*, October 1, 1937, p. 53; *Canadian Congress Journal* XVII, 4 & 5 (April & May 1938): 13.

here was to the sentiment of women and the instrumentality of men, for it was men, not women, who were identified as the patriotic, home-owning citizens.

In contrast, appeals to the distaff side were always made to women in their various homemaking capacities — as mothers, wives, and housekeepers as well as consumers. Backers of the Home Improvement Plan, like the National Council of Women, assumed that it was not as business women, home-owners, or paid labourers, but as “home workers” that women “must accept our full share of the responsibility of the success of this venture.”¹²⁹ Recalling proudly the “instinct for Mothering” out of which the NCWC was born, the organizations’s President, Edith (Mrs. George) Spencer, endorsed women’s involvement in the Plan as combining self-interest with a socially nurturant maternalism:

Every improvement made, every dollar spent in providing your family with prettier, more convenient, comfortable home surroundings is turning in another dividend for you. You are putting people to work. You are helping to solve that pressing problem of unemployment. You are giving other women, perhaps less fortunate homemakers, their chance to live and be happy.¹³⁰

In keeping with an advertising trend that developed in North America in the 1920s and 1930s, Home Improvement ads marshalled the opinion of ‘scientific experts’. Ads were peppered with the advice of psychologists and home economists, as well as home decorators and architects.¹³¹ Invocation of the experts was integral to the advertisers’ strategy of playing on the fears and insecurities of the public by reinforcing consumers’ “suspicions of their own inadequacies.”¹³² Home economists who doubled as advertising consultants, like Lillian Gilbreth and Christine Frederick in the U.S., helped ‘ad men’ zero in on the special susceptibilities of the female market. Frederick’s 1928 book *Selling Mrs. Consumer*, for instance, advocated the manipulation of “what she called women’s suggestibility, passivity, and their ‘inferiority complexes’.”¹³³ HIP publicity exploited women’s anxieties about their appearance, about their home-making talents and about the state of their homes. In an attempt to persuade Canadian housewives of the need to install a combination of medicine cabinet and dressing table in their kitchens, one ad suggested the importance of having hand lotion and a mirror at the ready “to make those few adjustments sometimes required when the door-bell rings unexpectedly.”¹³⁴ Another ad conjured up two humiliating situations that could haunt the hostess whose home had not been modernized:

Did you ever try to get out fresh linen for a bed in a hurry and have to rummage around in the semi-dark trying to find the right size, — while unexpected guests wring their hands over the trouble they are causing? Or did you ever have the embarrassing experience of grabbing a towel in a hurry and realizing all too late that it was the one you were saving for an emergency — the torn one?¹³⁵

Such quandaries could be obviated by the simple provision of a light in the linen closet.

Christine Frederick and other home economists also championed the extension of Frederick Taylor’s “scientific management” principles from the industrial work placed

129. PAC, MG 28 I 25, National Council of Women of Canada Papers, Vol. 71, Edith Spencer [President of NCWC] to Ray Brown [Director of Publicity, NEC], 29 April 1937.

130. PAC, MG 28 I 25, Vol. 71, correspondence between Ray Brown and Mrs. George Spencer, May 1937.

131. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #106; Vol. 3366, file 8, Press Release #70; Gertrude Crawford, “It Pays to Modernize,” *Maclean’s*, 1 December 1936, p. 61; 1 March 1937, p. 57.

132. Marchand, p. 352; see also Ewen, pp. 97-99.

133. Hayden, p. 285.

134. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #179.

135. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3366, file 10, Press Release #149.

AMÉLIOREZ VOS DEMEURES CETTE ANNÉE!

RÉNOVEZ VOTRE MAISON

Augmentez-en la Valeur... Mettez les Gens au Travail... en collaborant au
PLAN D'AMÉLIORATION DES MAISONS

L'été approche rapidement; voyez donc, sans plus tarder, à dresser le plan d'amélioration de votre maison. Un déboursé relativement modique vous permettra d'effectuer des améliorations considérables. Vous pourrez, par exemple, faire poser un pavé sur le toit, embellir le tertiaire, peindre et décorer l'intérieur et l'extérieur de la maison, renouveler la plomberie, installer un nouveau système de chauffage, poser une nouvelle toiture ou effectuer quelques-unes des nombreuses améliorations qui transforment en maison moderne une vieille maison.

FINANCEMENT SIMPLIFIÉ

Tout entrepreneur ou architecte, sous réserve de conditions de construction peut vous aider à obtenir un prêt sans le régime du Plan d'amélioration des maisons pour financer ces travaux. Vous pouvez, d'autre part, vous adresser directement à votre banquier. Aucune garantie ou endossement n'est requise; vous n'avez qu'à démontrer que vous êtes en mesure de rembourser l'argent par mensualités et le prêt vous est consenti, votre maison devient plus attrayante et plus confortable et vous procurez de l'emploi aux ouvriers qui en ont besoin.

Vous pouvez obtenir tous les renseignements relatifs au Plan d'amélioration des maisons en vous adressant à votre Comité local, au Président du Comité provincial, à votre banque ou enfin à la Commission nationale de Placement, à Ottawa.

Commission Nationale de Placement

SOUS LA PRÉDICTION DU GOUVERNEMENT FÉDÉRAL



Le rôle de cette section d'assistance financière est la Commission nationale de Placement, à son tour, de faire passer à la disposition des maîtres d'œuvre les fonds nécessaires à l'exécution de ces travaux. On peut également se adresser au Bureau de l'Entrepreneur de l'État, Ottawa, la loi sur la Commission nationale de Placement.

Source: *La Revue Populaire*, mai 1937, p. 62.

into the privatized home. In the name of efficiency, household labour was to be broken down into specialized processes along the same lines as factory production, despite the fact that in the home the woman was the sole worker.¹³⁶ Many of the renovation tips contained in HIP ads were inspired by pseudo-scientific management theory and infused with its rhetoric and imagery.

136. Hayden, 285. Christine Frederick's book, *Household Engineering: Scientific Management for the Home*, was published in 1920.

The kitchen above all became the focus of 'scientific' planning for efficiency, simplicity and convenience. "A kitchen that wastes no steps but has all the necessary equipment is the aim of nearly every housewife," claimed one HIP press release.¹³⁷ Such HIP ads received reinforcement from 'experts' writing in the popular press on how best to make use of the Home Improvement loans. In a *Maclean's* article entitled "Replanning the Kitchen," design consultant John Alexander warned that HIP beneficiaries had been making costly errors through insufficient attention to "scientific kitchen planning." While HIP loans were available only for permanent equipment (i.e., bath tubs, toilets, fixtures and flooring), whether one bought a sink or a refrigerator, its installation required the reconceptualization of the room and its contents as a well-ordered space.¹³⁸ A proper arrangement could well necessitate both rewiring and replumbing, themselves costly ventures but justifiable as 'short term pain for long term gain'.

Achieving the new ideal of a "laboratory-like kitchen"¹³⁹ involved not simply the introduction of new appliances but their positioning in a work environment of maximum efficiency. The 'kitchen that was not a kitchen' was "hard to work in,"¹⁴⁰ with appliances and work surfaces scattered haphazardly throughout the room in no logical relation to one another. In many older houses, kitchens were so large and badly arranged that "a woman had to be a marathon walker to prepare one meal."¹⁴¹ In general, design experts applauded the collaboration of "Home Economists, Architects, and Kitchen Specialists...to make the kitchen sanitary, pleasant and efficient."¹⁴² Time/motion studies and diagrammatic floor plans were produced to contrast the poorly laid out kitchen of the past with the convenient modern one. Spurious quantification was cleverly utilized to lend an aura of scientific authority to the efficiency claims. In the diagram reproduced in the Alexander article, flow arrows emphasized that the orderly modern kitchen cut out "much needless walking," reducing, by as much as 50 percent, the time and energy involved in meal preparation.¹⁴³ Those spearheading the "planned kitchen" answered the question "How many steps make a Pie?" with the reply "more than 100" in an old-fashioned kitchen as compared with a mere 22 in a modernized one. Leisure was held up as "THE REWARD OF KITCHEN EFFICIENCY."¹⁴⁴ In an HIP press release the Canadian husband was promised that the well-planned kitchen would sweeten his wife's disposition and improve her cooking.¹⁴⁵ Another HIP statement predicted that "the housewife will find that she is not as tired at the end of the day if she has less space to walk around in to locate the mixing bowl, the flour or a clean dish towel."¹⁴⁶

137. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #85.

138. John Alexander, "Replanning the Kitchen," *Maclean's*, 15 April 1937, pp. 72-73.

139. "Planning for a Maidless House," *Chatelaine*, November 1940, p. 55. On new household technologies and designs see also Veronica Strong-Boag, "Discovering the Home: The Last 150 Years of Domestic Work in Canada," in Paula Bourne, ed., *Women's Paid and Unpaid Work: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1985), pp. 44-48.

140. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3355, file 3, HIP Press Release, 15 January 1937.

141. Alexander "Replanning the Kitchen," p. 72.

142. "PLANNING THE KITCHEN: IGNORED YESTERDAY — A NECESSITY TODAY," *Maclean Building Reports Annual* (1936): p. 26; and Léonard Knott, "Ayez, vous aussi, une Cuisine Systématisée," *La Revue Populaire*, May 1937, pp. 28, 67.

143. Alexander, "Replanning the Kitchen," p. 72.

144. "Why Planned Kitchens?," *Maclean Building Reports Annual* (1937): 58.

145. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #104.

146. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #85.

Macleod's Magazine, March 1, 1937

27



You too can have a
GENERAL ELECTRIC KITCHEN



It's time to change to a modern General Electric Kitchen... trim and compact... clean and cool. A kitchen where a score of tedious tasks are done quickly and economically, safely by turning electric switches! A well planned, time-saving kitchen that will be your constant pride and joy!

In such a kitchen, General Electric services work daily magic. They preserve your food... do the heating and mixing... cook whole meals automatically... handle cooking alone... wash the dishes... and even dispose of the garbage!

Ask about the Government Loan

For a few dollars a month, you can own a General Electric Kitchen—under the new Home Improvement Plan of the Dominion Government. Interest rates are remarkably low... and payments can be spread over as many as 36 months. Ask your bank manager.

Complete suggestions on how to transform your kitchen are available through your local G-E dealer, or the Kitchen Planning Division of the General Electric Home Bureau. Send for free booklets today.

Canadian General Electric Co., Limited
 315 King St. West, TORONTO

Please send me, without obligation, five copies of the illustrated booklets "The General Electric Home" and "The New Art of Living".

Name.....

Street Address.....

.....

Town or City.....

CANADIAN GENERAL ELECTRIC CO., LIMITED

Experts generally divided the kitchen into separate work stations, ranging in number from three to five, laid out in a U-shaped pattern.¹⁴⁷ Where possible, work surfaces and appliances were to be continuous and at a uniform height (normally 36 inches from the floor) "to eliminate tiresome bending," "stooping and consequent backaches."¹⁴⁸ Alexander's

147. Alexander "Replanning the Kitchen," pp. 72-73; "Why Planned Kitchens?," *Macleod Building Reports Annual* (1937): 58, 60; "Is a Pantry Necessary?," *Macleod Building Reports Annual* (1937): 62.

148. "Is a Pantry Necessary?," p. 62; "Planning the Kitchen", p. 26.

replanned kitchen featured four “centres,” each for a specialized work process — storage, preparation, cooking and cleaning. These were placed in a “labour-saving” order¹⁴⁹ so as to facilitate

the uninterrupted sequence of food handling from its entry at the back door through the stages of storage and preparation until it reaches the dining-room table, with the least confusion of crossing traffic lines.¹⁵⁰

Work stations were to have their own drawers and cupboard space for utensils and dishes in compliance with the scientific management axiom that “each tool should be located near the work process of which it forms a part.” Recommended was the replacement of free-standing pieces of furniture, like large Victorian wooden hutches, by built-in cabinets extending across the wall on either side of the sink and along other available wall space.¹⁵¹ The kitchen without adequate cupboard space, an HIP press release admonished, kept the housewife “continuously on the run.”¹⁵²

While the tone of many of these appeals tended to trivialize housework, and their gender-specific pitch contributed to the perpetuation of an inequitable distribution of domestic labour, there is another side to the ‘scientific’ redesign of kitchen space. Indisputably the installation of counters at uniform heights minimized bending, and the layout of cupboards, utensils and appliances in a convenient, work-related pattern eliminated at least some waste motion. But in the process of abandoning the large, less efficient kitchen of the past that had served as the hub of the household’s activities, the modern housewife was left isolated within a small, well-ordered, and tidy kitchen, stripped of its social functions and designed solely as a site of work.¹⁵³

Manufacturers of kitchen equipment did not hesitate to capitalize on these HIP modernization schemes. Canadian General Electric, for example, sold appliances in a coordinated ensemble around which a total kitchen would be created. So closely were these companies tied in to the promotion of the HIP that one ad for the “General Electric Kitchen” used the “before” and “after” photographs of the first Canadian kitchen to have been ‘scientifically’ modernized under the Home Improvement Plan, in Valois, Quebec. The CGE ad promised the Canadian housewife that “For a few dollars a month” she could “own a General Electric kitchen — under the new Home Improvement Plan,” and thereby fulfill her dreams for a kitchen that is “trim and compact...clean and cool.” Emphasizing the magically transformative power of electricity when joined with the ingenuity of CGE-designed appliances, this ad tantalized women with the vision of “A kitchen where a score of tedious tasks are done quickly and economically, merely by turning electric switches!”¹⁵⁴

Ads like these were aimed most pointedly at an urban and fairly well-to-do market. While approximately two-thirds of Canadian households were electrified by the early 1930s,

149. Helen G. Campbell, “Paging the Winners in Chatelaine’s Kitchen Idea Contest,” *Chatelaine*, February 1937, p. 77.

150. Alexander, “Replanning the Kitchen,” p. 72.

151. *Ibid.*

152. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #175.

153. Glenna Matthews, *“Just a Housewife”: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 169-70.

154. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3355, file 3, HIP Press Release, 15 January 1937; *Maclean’s*, March 1, 1937, p. 27.

most of these were located in cities and towns. In Ontario in 1935, for example, 90 percent of urban households were wired with electricity as compared with only 16 percent of those in farm regions and hamlets. Moreover, of the urban electrified homes few were equipped with the full array of kitchen appliances available: only 12.6 percent owned refrigerators, only 27.3 percent had ranges, and only 53.5 percent had toasters. The average farm wife was still hauling wood to stoke a wood-fired stove, lighting her kitchen with difficult-to-clean gas or kerosene lamps, and storing fresh fruit and vegetables in root cellars, not refrigerators. CGE certainly hoped through its ads to increase electrification in rural areas and to capture more dollars from the urban working-class family budget, but realistically the CGE 'total kitchen' was affordable only to the well-off.¹⁵⁵

While CGE flogged 'packaged' kitchens, the Crane company, manufacturers of plumbing and heating supplies, spoke of three "vital points" in a house — kitchen, bathroom and furnace room — where home improvement should start. In an ad bearing the HIP emblem, Crane singled out its "Sunnydale Cabinet Sink" as the place to begin modernizing the kitchen. Crane's "Cabinet Sink" was guaranteed to meet the scientific management requirements for "generous storage space" beneath the basin for utensils used in food preparation, cleaning agents and a garbage disposal unit.¹⁵⁶ Crane paid even more attention to the bathroom, where it could supply a complete line of toilets, bath tubs, sinks, and plumbing.¹⁵⁷ Yet, while HIP promoters were declaring "the day of the prosaic bathroom is gone forever,"¹⁵⁸ many rural households lacked even the simplest indoor plumbing, let alone the sophisticated hardware advertised here.

In their appeal to 'Mrs. Consumer', ads conveyed conflicting messages. On the one hand, the woman was represented as a responsible "purchasing agent"¹⁵⁹ with a careful "eye on her budget."¹⁶⁰ She was the one who could exercise a restraining influence, "persuading the family to spend" its money "for the improvement of the home rather than for an automobile or a radio."¹⁶¹ One HIP press release told the story of a man who saved enough to take his family on a trip to Europe. His wife, however, "being wiser than he, thought they would do better to renovate their home."¹⁶² While the HIP programme in general promoted spending over saving, it also sought to channel that spending into modernization rather than holiday flings or other 'frills'. Here, the *thrifty* 'Mrs. Consumer' was to the fore.

On the other hand, women were portrayed as spendthrifts and compulsive shoppers. Universalizing the upper-middle-class woman with considerable spending power, one HIP ad opened with the claim: "Every woman has hoped some time or other for a cupboard just for her hats." The suggested design featured separate drawers for makeup and gloves

155. Calculations are based on statistics from *Canada Year Book* 1936, p. 139, along with figures from *The Bulletin of Ontario Hydro* in the 1930s and other sources used by Dianne Dodd in "Delivering Electrical Technology to the Ontario Housewife, 1920-1939: An Alliance of Professional Women, Advertisers and the Electrical Industry" Carleton University (Ph.D. thesis, 1988), Figure 8, p. 163.

156. *Maclean's*, 15 June 1937, p. 37.

157. *Maclean's*, 18 January 1937, p. 35; and *La Revue Populaire*, May 1937, p. 5.

158. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #84.

159. Marchand, p. 170.

160. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #76.

161. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3355, file 3, "Local Advisory Committees. Some Suggestions for their Organization".

162. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #68, "Speech of E.J. Young."

and pocketbooks and scarves.¹⁶³ In the corporation of the family the woman may have been the "purchasing agent", but, through her economic dependency, she remained accountable to her husband, the "president."¹⁶⁴ One woman wrote in to *Chatelaine's* "Kitchen Idea Contest": "I hope to win a prize and coax my husband to modernize my kitchen."¹⁶⁵ Built into this relationship, because of her need to account for every penny spent, was the wife's vulnerability to her husband's criticism of her performance as financial manager. Even the thriftiest housewife could be made to appear wasteful or frivolous from the man's perspective. Women were seen as waging a constant assault on the wallets of their husbands, an image that certain comic strips, like "Dagwood and Blondie," have helped keep alive for decades. Ten-Test, an insulation company that advertised its product in conjunction with both the Dominion Housing Act and the Home Improvement Plan, exploited this potential for creating guilt in women. One ad invited the reader to eavesdrop on a domestic squabble in which the husband reprimanded his wife for poor consumer decision making with the charge: "Women Think money grows on Trees!" "Discouraged" and guilt-ridden, the wife sought out a woman friend for consolation and was told that the advice of an architect could solve her problems.¹⁶⁶

Appeals to women as homemakers also contained contradictory images. At the same time that the 'average' Canadian housewife was being proletarianized into a home worker, she was also being elevated to the status of a chatelaine. Although some HIP ads left it open as to whether "a housewife does her own work or leaves it to a maid,"¹⁶⁷ most press releases as well as scientific management schemes presupposed a maidless house. So also did domestic appliance manufacturers. Despite the fact that the percentage of gainfully-employed women in domestic service increased during the Depression,¹⁶⁸ Canadian General Electric continued to trumpet the advantages of replacing hired help with "modern electric servants." In the imagination of CGE advertisers, the mistress of a General Electric home, modernized under the HIP, would possess "Lovely Hands...free from toil."¹⁶⁹ Similarly, while HIP modernization literature recognized the home, especially the kitchen, as a site of work for women, they were pressured to conceal the evidence of their household labour. Promoting the HIP in the pages of *Chatelaine*, architectural consultant Evan Parry claimed to know that "the average woman is not keen on having the next door neighbor or the casual tradesman see her when engaged upon the family wash."¹⁷⁰ Just as HIP press releases reflected the modern design requirement for concealment of the functional apparatus of the home (like plumbing fixtures, radiators, even telephones),¹⁷¹ the modern housewife was repeatedly enjoined to hide "unsightly" utensils, pots and pans.¹⁷²

163. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #151.
 164. Marchand, pp. 169-70.
 165. Helen G. Campbell, "Paging the Winners in *Chatelaine's* Kitchen Idea Contest," *Chatelaine*, February 1937, p. 77.
 166. *Maclean's*, 15 May 1938, p. 1.
 167. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3366, file 9, Press Release #113.
 168. Marjorie Cohen, "Women at Work in Canada During the Depression," Paper presented at the Blue Collar Workers Conference, University of Windsor, May 1979, pp. 7-8.
 169. *Maclean's*, 1 May 1937, p. 25.
 170. Evan Parry, "The Utility Room," *Chatelaine*, March 1939, p. 55.
 171. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Releases #84, #101, and #91; Vol. 3366, file 8, Press Release #64.
 172. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3355, file 3, HIP Press Release, 15 January 1937.

In the HIP appeals to women as homemakers, women were identified so closely with the home that they were encouraged to express the essence of their personalities through the rooms and furnishings of their houses, particularly the kitchen. HIP press statements typically sought to instill in women the desire to stand out from all their neighbours through unique home decoration. "Every once in a while," one ad posited,

the average home-maker wants a kitchen that is entirely individual and doesn't resemble in the slightest the yellow and blue, or the red and white or the pink and brown workshops of her friends.¹⁷³

Some ads recognized that women's confinement to the home might be a source of depression or restlessness. Paradoxically, these same ads urged women to undertake home decoration as a cure for discontent. "One of the surest antidotes for a home-minded woman with a discouraged feeling is redecoration," one HIP ad prescribed. "The redecorating of one room or an entire house can do more to soothe the troubled spirit of the true housewife than a trip to the Canary Islands," this ad maintained, as though the average home-owner in Depression Canada could have contemplated such an extravagant vacation.¹⁷⁴ Another HIP press release told those suffering from *Wanderlust*, "One way to appease your desire for a change is to rearrange completely the furniture in your house and, if possible, redecorate."¹⁷⁵ Thus women's feelings of entrapment and their yearnings for independence were subverted and channelled back into domesticity.

Indeed, women were so home-identified in Home Improvement Plan advertising that woman and dwelling became one, and the house took on a feminine persona. The homemaker was encouraged to empathize in a very personal way with the feelings of her house. "Did you ever look at your house as you approached it and think it looked dispirited and dejected?", one HIP press release queried the Canadian housewife. "Remember how a facial or a wave will raise your own morale and let the house profit accordingly," the ad continued knowingly.¹⁷⁶ Renovating the facade of a house was made analogous to giving a woman a face lift.¹⁷⁷ In contrast to women's personalized identification with their homes, men were assumed to objectify their houses, viewing them simply as pieces of real estate.

Despite the extent to which HIP ads promoted the coalescence of woman with home, some expressed the worry that women might make the home too feminine an environment for the male head of household and his son. Excessive accommodation to the feminine taste for ruffles and frills threatened to overthrow the 'natural' order of the patriarchal family. In a thinly disguised reference to the wife's economic dependence on her husband and consequent fear of losing him, one press release warned that "only a foolish woman plans a totally feminine house in which a man will feel out of place." Accordingly, this ad instructed the woman to go easy on the "dainty," "lady-like" touches, for such decor would "hardly...make a man want to stay around and read the evening newspaper and spill ashes."¹⁷⁸ Elsewhere, a wise housewife was commended for having turned part of the basement into a game room with boxing ring to entice her husband and two sons to stay at home evenings instead of "always going off to the club for a few rounds of fun."¹⁷⁹

173. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #48.

174. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #92.

175. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #135.

176. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #111.

177. "1937 Home Improvement Year," *Chatelaine*, January 1937, p. 49.

178. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #136.

179. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3347, file 5, Press Release #57.

While it was not all right for the living room to be overly feminine, it was quite proper for it to evoke male overlordship. One HIP redecoration tip recommended panelled walls and beamed ceilings "reminiscent of the days of turrets and towers," and suggesting "to the mind of its owner the fact that 'every man's home is his castle'."¹⁸⁰ Not only were women to cater to masculine tastes, they were also to create if possible a "man's room" where he could "read, write or play cards" and not worry about having it tidied by his wife before the arrival of company. A room such as this, women were told, "should be the aim of every housewife who wants to see her husband happy and contented."¹⁸¹ The female persona of the house notwithstanding, man's privileged place in it was to be protected and confirmed.

In general, the spatial ordering of the house and the gender identity embodied in rooms and their furnishings expressed and reinforced the sexual division of labour. The mother/wife was to give priority to the spatial needs of other family members before her own. Only after the husband got his den, the son a club room, and the daughter an attic bedroom, could the wife expect a space of her own, perhaps a sewing room.¹⁸² "The housewife who enjoys sewing will find a room specially planned for this purpose a great joy," crooned one HIP ad.¹⁸³ Ironically, like the other rooms considered woman's domain, the laundry or utility room and the kitchen, the sewing room was a site of work. The reality of the home as a place of leisure for men and work for women was thereby preserved.

As mothers responsible for the upbringing of their children, women were charged with implanting and enforcing gender divisions. Although HIP ads held sex-role differentiation to be innate, they also gave instructions to the mother on how to preside over the proper gender development of her children.¹⁸⁴ Women were advised that "the home-making instincts of a little girl may be fostered or stunted by the kind of room she lives in." The responsible mother would furnish her daughter's room with "a dressing table, a desk, a comfortable chair for reading" and maybe "a coffee table from which she might dispense cocoa or orange juice to her young friends." It was expected that "the pride of the child's heart" would be "her draped dressing table, 'like Mothers's'."¹⁸⁵ In contrast, a boy's room might use "ships, dogs, hockey, football or soldiers" as the decorative theme.¹⁸⁶

Despite the idealization of the home as a haven of love and affection, HIP ads also recognized that the home was an arena of conflict. It was women's job, as wives and mothers, to manage tension among family members. Proper allocation of space was billed as a solution to family conflict. "Does your family lose its temper when it continually trips over umbrellas, canes and sticks?" women were asked.¹⁸⁷ The answer lay in the provision of more storage space. An HIP-linked Marbolem ad showed one woman boasting to her friend about how she averted a crisis in her family by creating "a smart extra room" where the children could practice the piano without disturbing their mother "on the phone" or

180. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3366, file 8, Press Release #88.

181. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3347, file 5, Press Release #44.

182. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Releases #43 and #177; PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3347, file 5, Press Releases #57 and 44. *Maclean's*, 15 March 1937, p. 1.

183. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #177.

184. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Releases #116 and #96.

185. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3354, file 10, Press Release #96.

186. *Ibid.*

187. PAC, RG 27, Vol. 3366, file 9, Press Release #132.

their father listening to "a special radio speech." This room proved useful to the parents as well, for, after the kids were in bed, Mom and Dad could have their friends in for a "sing-song."¹⁸⁸ The subtext of these ads was that those families too poor to afford such resolution of conflict through "wise" allocation of space would remain caught in wrangling.

The Home Improvement Plan's intent to generate male employment by the salvaging of run-down homes was in keeping with Depression values. "Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without" was an oft-repeated saying of the 1930s.¹⁸⁹ At the same time, the encouragement that the HIP gave to loosening credit and stimulating consumerism heralded an end to the period of "telling ourselves that self-denial is good."¹⁹⁰ The injunction to lift self-restraint on spending was directed, it should be noted, at the more affluent of Canadian society, the group of middle-income home-owners truly targeted by the Plan. While some ads focussed on the practical importance of certain structural repairs and upgrading fire prevention standards, a much greater number featured such luxuries as breakfast nooks, a second living room, a thoroughly modernized kitchen and "rumpus room conversions" for the well-off.¹⁹¹ The class bias underlying the Plan did not go entirely unnoticed. While the right-leaning *Labour Leader* and the TLC's middle-of-the-road *Canadian Congress Journal* jumped on the HIP bandwagon, the radical press was unimpressed. Although somewhat hopeful of the Plan's job creation potential, the Communist *Clarion* reminded readers that the HIP was designed to benefit the banks, not just workers, and chastised policy makers for once again "overlooking the slums" and their inhabitants.¹⁹² Opposition parliamentarians also voiced serious doubts about the social benefits that would accrue to the least fortunate of Canada's working class. "The industrial workers of Canada will wait until doomsday before they get any relief from this Bill," T.L. Church, Conservative M.P., charged in the House.¹⁹³ It was not designed to help them cope with high taxes or to fend off foreclosures. As CCF member J.S. Woodsworth pointed out, "it simply does not touch the great problem of housing that faces the country at the present time." In fact, he warned, "it may become a substitute for a more comprehensive scheme."¹⁹⁴ Despite increasing public awareness of the wretched housing conditions endured by the nation's poor,¹⁹⁵ the HIP was never intended to tackle this problem. Ironically, those most in need of home improvement were therefore left to fend for themselves in their inadequate and often overcrowded, ramshackle dwellings. Moreover, despite the "great hullabaloo" surrounding the promotion of the Plan, the job creation it promised was limited to a small and specialized group of workers in the building and allied trades. Nor was the job creation distributed evenly throughout the country. Indeed, between 1937 and 1940, 48 percent of the loans and almost half the total number of dollars borrowed under

188. *Chatelaine*, April 1940, back of front cover.

189. Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), p. 2.

190. "1937 Home Improvement Year," *Chatelaine*, January 1937, p. 41.

191. Bacher uses this phrase to characterize the use made of loans approved in the 1950s under a similar plan created by the 1944 National Housing Act but not put into operation until 1955. The term is also applicable, however, to many of the HIP ads of the 1930s. John Bacher, "Canadian Housing 'Policy' in Perspective," *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine* XV, 1 (June/juin 1986) p. 10.

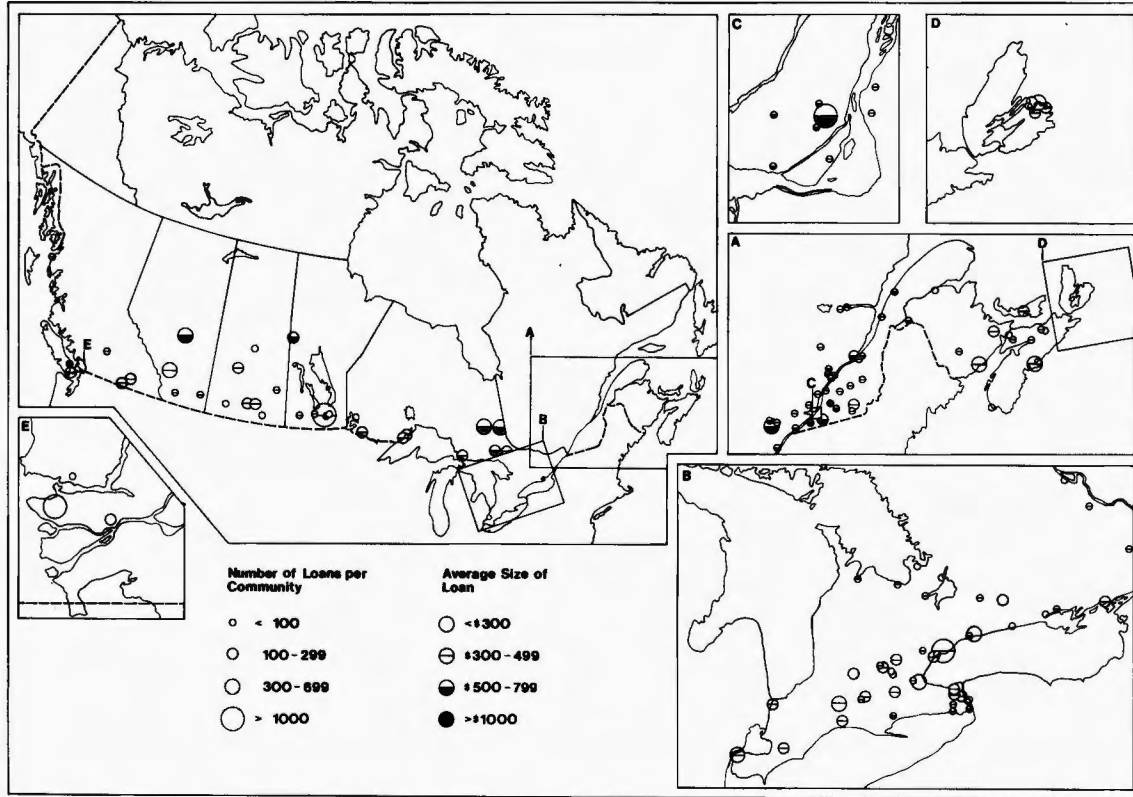
192. "Overlooking the Slums," Editorial, *The Daily Clarion* (Toronto) 4 February 1937, p. 4.

193. Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 2 February 1937, p. 468.

194. *Ibid.*, p. 476.

195. J. David Hulchanski, "The 1935 Dominion Housing Act: Setting the Stage for a Permanent Federal Presence in Canada's Housing Sector," *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine* XV, 1 (June/juin 1986): 22.

MAP 1: Home Improvement Plan Loans in Cities and Towns with Population 5,000 or More, by November 30, 1937.



Source: Calculated from PAC, RG27, Vol. 3370, Press Release #178

“A KITCHEN THAT WASTES NO STEPS...”

the Plan were located in Ontario. Other provinces trailed far behind, beginning with Quebec which captured about 15 percent of the loans and 19 percent of the dollars and ending with Prince Edward Island which received less than 1 percent of the loans (see Map 1). Woodsworth was clearly right when he warned early on that the HIP would not "begin to touch the great mass of the unemployed people of this country."¹⁹⁶ Furthermore, in keeping with the corporatist philosophy so dear to the heart of Arthur Purvis, Chairman of the National Employment Commission and head of the Dupont dynasty, the planners made sure that benefits would accrue to Canadian business, both large and small.

While criticism of the class implications of the Act were raised on the floor of the House and elsewhere, rarely if ever did anyone question its gender implications. This silence indicates the depth to which the priority of the male and ensuing gender divisions were unquestioningly entrenched in Canadian society. Despite evidence of widespread female joblessness, women's unemployment was simply not addressed by the Plan. Indeed, the Plan's clear assignment of women to domesticity reflected the strong opposition during the Depression to the gainful employment of the married woman and the prevailing assumption that her right to work should be sacrificed to the needs of the male breadwinner. In addition, the Plan became another arm of the state's intervention in the home to establish norms of familial constitution and gender roles. While other kinds of familial size and arrangement existed in Canada in the 1930s, the HIP consistently represented a male-headed household with a stay-at-home wife and two to three children occupying a single-family dwelling. Respect was paid to the 'proper' hierarchical relationship between husband and wife. Granted, the wife was regarded as the financial manager; but she was to remain answerable to her husband, the boss. The housewife's freedom to transform the environment to which she was confined was always to be limited by her prior duty to safeguard her husband's comfort and authority. Her home decorating activities were also to serve the proper gender development of her children, a task with which she, as mother, was entrusted. The imagery and rhetoric with which the privatized home was endorsed contributed to the domestic oppression of women by ideologically reinforcing their confinement to domesticity and by adding new features to the oppressive nature of unpaid household labour. Women, isolated from other home workers, were caught in a cross fire of contradictory images while their domestic labour was rendered both more monotonous and invisible. The scientific management blueprints for reordering the housewife's work space and breaking down her work into a series of discrete, repetitive tasks, not to be varied, recognized the homemaker as worker. At the same time, however, the chatelaine image which she was to project required a masking of her household labour.

The Home Improvement Plan, therefore, stands as an example of the Canadian state's role as an important agent in the social construction of class and gender relations. Furthermore, critical response to the Plan demonstrates the extent to which, in this period of economic distress, class inequities were visible and challenged, however feebly, while the patriarchal structuring of gender inequities was not only accepted as given but viewed as crucial to economic recovery by all but a small minority of vocal women.¹⁹⁷ For most

196. *Ibid.*, p. 475. Similar criticisms of the HIP appeared in the *Canadian Forum* alongside more general attacks on both King and the NEC for inattention to the housing needs of low income Canadians. See "More Facts on Housing," *Canadian Forum*, March 1938, p. 407; and Frank Underhill, "The Housing Fiasco in Canada," *Canadian Forum*, October 1937, pp. 228-29.

197. See the CP and CCF women of the 1935 Canadian League against War and Fascism and the 1936 CCF Toronto women discussed by John Manley, "Women and the Left in the 1930s: The Case of the Toronto CCF Women's Joint Committee," *Atlantis* 5, 2 (Spring 1980): 100-19.

Canadians, the problem of men's unemployment took priority over women's. Indeed the belief was strong that women, particularly married women, were holding down jobs that properly belonged to men. Women's attachment to the home was perceived as precarious. Thus, in the minds of policy makers, reinforcing the ideal of women at home and out of the paid work force went hand in hand with creating jobs for males in order to redress the 'genuinely' problematic unemployment, that of men.