# Homes, Household Practices, and the Domain(s) of Citizenship

# by

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*If the core problem of wilderness is that it distances us too much from the very things it teaches us to value, then the question we must ask is what it can tell us about home, the place where we actually live. How can we take the positive values we associate with wilderness and bring them closer to home? ...we need to discover a common middle ground in which all of these things, from the city to the wilderness, can somehow be encompassed in the word “home.” Home, after all, is the place where finally we make our living. It is the place for which we take responsibility, the place we try to sustain so we can pass on what is best in it (and in ourselves) to our children.* William Cronon, “The Trouble With Wilderness”[[1]](#footnote-1)

*[T]he point is that all green actions in the home have a public impact, in the specific sense of the creation of an ecological footprint. This, in turn, potentially generates the kinds of obligations I have said we should associate with ecological citizenship.* Andrew Dobson, *Citizenship and the Environment*[[2]](#footnote-2)

*“We become fighters when something threatens our home.”* Cora Tucker, Environmental Justice leader [[3]](#footnote-3)

As these epigraphs indicate, “home” has become a normatively appealing foundation for environmental arguments in the past couple decades. Indeed, as many have noted, the etymology of “ecology” connects it with the ancient Greek “*oikos*,” the home or household.[[4]](#footnote-4) Yet as the context of each of the quotations suggests, home also stands in contrast to other more conventional ways of conceptualizing ecological concern and action. For Cronon, it is a contrast to the “trouble” with “wilderness,” conceptualized as a place distant – both conceptually and spatially – from where we live. For Dobson, arguing that the obligations of citizenship begin at home is at odds with dominant conceptions of citizenship as action circumscribed within the public sphere. For Tucker, organizing motivated by threats to home – where we “live, work, and play” – set the environmental justice movement apart, in both style and substance, from other manifestations of environmental activism.

I applaud this emergent recognition of home and household as an integral concern that environmental critics must engage, since this is perhaps the premier location of material practices central to everyday life. In postindustrial societies, one study has recently noted,

Households serve as a reservoir into which resources are sunk, as a center where purchasing decisions are made, as a nexus for energy used in transportation and heating… The typical infrastructure associated with houses sucks in resources through roads, water lines, gas lines, power lines, internet cables, and phone lines. Homes also come equipped with the means to excrete wastes, through sewer systems and trash-collection networks. This system makes households the nexus for resource consumption.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The number of such households is also on the rise – independent of population growth – due to declines in the average number of people per household.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The centrality of home and household to environmental concern is reflected in other broad cultural trends. Indeed it seems fair to say, with Kersty Hobson, that "there is now a general tendency of individuals in countries such as the United Kingdom to demarcate the home as the main space where pro-environmental action takes place.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Yet identifying the home as “the main space” for “pro-environmental action” invites crucial questions about what sorts of action are included and excluded here, as well as questions about the broader implications of situating action here.

One of the most familiar responses to this newfound attention has been the rise of “ethical-” or “green-consumerism.” Here, we find a diverse and growing array of products, services, and practices – as well as advice and examples on websites, blogs, magazines, and books – that have emerged in a proclaimed effort to make homes, houses, and household activities more environmentally responsible. No doubt familiar to most readers, examples include lower-impact building materials and design, solar panels and waste reduction practices, recycled products, non-toxic household cleaners, energy efficient appliances, local and organic foods, reusable bags and bottles.

Many have rightly charged that such a consumerist approach narrows our imagination of feasible alternatives by privatizing and individualizing responsibility. Some also draw attention to the exclusivity and privilege reflected in an approach that often depends upon a combination of money, time, access, and sometimes specialized knowledge, for action – a combination most likely possessed by those identified as “post-materialists.” Those seeking an alternative to privatized green consumerism are often drawn to a notion of public citizenship. I argue, however, that a contrast between private consumerism and public citizenship overlook much that might be promising in attention to home and household practices. As the nexus for a vast array of infrastructure, resources, and practices, home and household are integral to the material/social reproduction of everyday life. Sheltering, caring, cooking, cleaning, making, provisioning, nurturing, teaching, welcoming, excluding, fighting, living and dying – *home-making* – is quite simply a far broader terrain and crucible than a discussion of private consumer choices would lead us to believe. I argue that reflection upon home-making can prompt us to think in fruitful new ways about citizenship and thereby the possibilities for environmental criticism and change.

I begin by reflecting upon a decidedly unconventional home. My experiences here challenged me to revisit some of my own preconceptions by highlighting tensions, questions, and possibilities that point toward the sort of citizenship that I develop later in the chapter.

1. **An Interlude and Illustration: CCAT**

Shortly after my arrival as an assistant professor at my university in the late 1990s, I was invited to give a presentation at a student-run organization affectionately known on campus as “see-cat” – the Campus Center for Appropriate Technology (CCAT). Although I had a previous background in student activism, CCAT stood out among the many student organizations with which I was familiar – for one thing, it was a rough-around-the-edges house with a constant hum of activity surrounding it. It was the residence for three students, selected annually to co-direct its programs, and a home-away-from-home to a great many other members of the campus community. Over the years, CCAT has developed and implemented a wide array of renewable energy technologies, energy and water conservation strategies, low-impact building techniques, materials reuse, and organic gardens. It has also cultivated lots of pragmatic, knowledgeable, and hard-working student activists and leaders.

Founded twenty years earlier, in the late-1970s, CCAT’s name hearkens back to its emergence in the heyday of the so-called “appropriate technology” movement and was modeled after the “Integral Urban House” in Berkeley, California – an effort to apply some of the self-reliant “back to the land” ethos of the era in a more urban setting.[[8]](#footnote-8) Appropriate technology as a whole was inspired by the economic and cultural analysis of works such as E.F. Schumacher’s *Small is Beautiful*.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Critics have long contended that what the movement lacked, however, was an explicit conception of how their envisioned social model was to be achieved; that is, how “appropriate” forms of technology might become integral to society as a whole rather than an “alternative” attractive only to those on the margins. For example, Langdon Winner argued that the movement implicitly embraced what he labeled the “build a better mousetrap” approach to social change. This approach relied upon an unsubstantiated faith that the creation and development of new forms of renewable energy, smaller-scale technologies, and other practices could become widespread simply through the inherent power of a better idea, and thereby bring about a social revolution. Because the advocates of appropriate technology were inattentive to or dismissive of the role of social and political institutions and power, Winner writes elegiacally that they were “lovely visionaries, naïve about the forces that confronted them.”[[10]](#footnote-10) With this context in mind, it is not surprising that the center of gravity at CCAT’s founding was among students learning to build better mousetraps, while focusing relatively little on social and political power: those majoring in environmental engineering.

By the time of my arrival in the 90s, the very language of “appropriate technology” as well as the “mousetrap” approach seemed to me anachronistic, of a piece with the aging hippies and back-to-the-landers that could still be found strolling the plaza of our small Northern California town. Sympathetic as I was, being invited to talk about the future of appropriate technology was a challenge, because it wasn’t immediately apparent to me that there was such a future, or what constructive role this organization and the ideas that inspired it fit into contemporary efforts on behalf of environmental sustainability. Nonetheless, I accepted the invitation in large part because of the infectious energy, conviction, and talent that seemed to emanate from the students involved at the house. It was evident that while the language of “appropriate technology” had faded from the wider public discourse, the appeal of CCAT’s vision was strong. Wrestling with these tensions has been central to my involvement with CCAT over the years. Here I want to suggest ways in which the possibilities that emerge from these tensions have broader implications for thinking about home, citizenship, and environmental criticism.

CCAT recently celebrated its thirty-fifth anniversary; an impressive achievement for any group and a rather remarkable one for such an ambitious and student-run endeavor. Yet what Winner characterized as the technological exuberance and individualism of the mousetrap theory of social change has long resonated with me. I have come to conclude that one secret to CCAT’s success is that their vision is no longer – if it ever really was – driven by the mousetrap theory.

Indeed, the vision and mission statement of CCAT are more reflective of its context as a home and household than the mousetrap theory would lead one to expect. Here CCAT is characterized as committed to demonstrating a way of living that is “both practical and rewarding.” Language of community building, bringing together diverse viewpoints, and learning by doing are deeply entwined with the more expected references to sustainable technological systems themselves.[[11]](#footnote-11) First and foremost, I have come to see, CCAT is an experiment in living, and its projects and activities are the embodiment of an ongoing dialogue about what sort of life it is good to live and what sort of household practices might help facilitate that life. The interests of the program directors is also suggestive here – while I have noted that the early leaders were drawn predominantly from engineering, a far higher number now come from majors in the humanities and social sciences, where dialogue, critical thinking, and attention to questions of power and institutions are central to the endeavor.

To discuss home – CCAT or other – requires that we recognize the significance of two relevant aspects. Heidegger characterized these as “building” and “dwelling,” while going on to argue that “to build is in itself already to dwell.”[[12]](#footnote-12) The first of these – “building” – results in the physical structure of shelter, or *housing*. The second – dwelling – entails a wide diversity of household practices. These two sides of home are integral and exist in dynamic relation to each other. To insist upon the centrality of both is important because, as Iris Marion Young has shown, even Heidegger – who begins by positing this relation – goes on to privilege the work of building, while neglecting the work entailed in dwelling.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Young critiques Heidegger’s attribution of creativity distinctly to building as a male bias, only conceivable by presuming that women occupy a fixed and essentialized role as those who cultivate and preserve the dwelling space once built. Stabilized in this way, it would appear that there is far less to say about the aspects of dwelling that aren’t focused upon building itself. The rest can seem to be mere “housework” – the endless, repetitive, gendered and instrumental labor of cleaning, cooking, and maintaining. Young exposes and rejects this presumption that “all homemaking is housework,” however, thereby allowing us to recognize cultivation and preservation of dwelling as active processes of engaged subjects, which can only exist in dynamic relation to building.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The engineering students who founded CCAT were necessarily focused upon building – or, in fact, re-building. The house that they occupied and renovated was a vacant and dilapidated residential structure in a neglected corner of the university campus, slated to be set alight as training for firefighters. In relatively short order, and with the university’s tacit permission, they garnered extensive donations of money and materials, renovated the interior, rewired the electricity, poured insulation into the walls and ceiling, installed active solar technology, and began a longer process of developing and installing rainwater catchment, grey-water treatment, a composting toilet, a greenhouse that also provided passive solar heating, and reclaiming the surrounding land for vegetable and herb gardens.[[15]](#footnote-15)

While hardly immune to gendered norms and stereotypes, as a residential student-run program rather than a nuclear family unit they could not presume that the household practices of cultivation and dwelling would be fixed based upon gender and made largely invisible. That’s not to say that such matters always went smoothly. In fact, many interpersonal conflicts and negotiations, some of them gendered, centered upon such matters as cleaning, caring for the house’s (very) public spaces, and other essential household practices. As the technologies and systems of the house have expanded, so have the diversity of practices integral to dwelling within it. Building – especially for a house like CCAT – is an ongoing endeavor. Nonetheless, for substantial periods in CCAT’s history, these projects have receded in importance while the focus on dwelling became primary. Here the question is how to live with – and within – the building, a dynamic and contested process that can never be determined by the systems or technologies themselves. It is in relation to these household roles and responsibilities that it becomes clear that as an experiment in living, CCAT is necessarily about dwelling in the broadest sense, not just building, and that practices of dwelling are inescapably political.

While the 1970s language of appropriate technology has not made a widespread comeback, the notion of a more environmentally sustainable home, and attention to household practices as central to sustainability, certainly has. Moreover, the notion of a model or demonstration house has become widespread in recent years. It’s not just LEED-certified or other so-called sustainable buildings and systems that have garnered attention; public accounts – often in the form of blogs, books, and other narratives – of a household’s practices, have also become widespread in recent years.[[16]](#footnote-16) CCAT anticipated much of this recent growth of model homes and sustainable living experiments by several decades. As Noortje Marres shows, the structures and systems of these homes, as well as technologies designed to monitor, document, and display their energy use and other sustainability-related features, invest these things with normative meaning that make them a public basis for political contestation.[[17]](#footnote-17)

I’ve served as a member of CCAT’s advisory committee for many years now. Composed of present and former student leaders as well as other university and community representatives, this group has provided one of several spaces for regular discussion, debate, and evaluation of current and proposed projects, plans, and systems at CCAT. Meetings provide an opportunity for the more technically knowledgeable members to contribute their expertise in evaluating rapidly changing technologies and building techniques. Yet far more fundamental is an ongoing conversation about the ends and goals the group ought to be pursuing and the particular interpretations and values that members bring to bear on the inescapable and never-finally-settled questions of what counts as “sustainable” or “appropriate” – not in the abstract, but in the concrete lived reality of CCAT’s residents and many other participants and visitors. In this sense, the material practices of the household and systems of the house are best understood in Latour’s terms as conversations about “matters of concern,” rather than fixed, uncontested “matters of fact.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

I’ll offer two illustrations of this conversation here. It was a point of pride and publicity years ago when the group cut the cables tying the house to the electrical utility’s grid. CCAT assembled an extensive roof-top solar panel array early in their history, and maintained a basement battery bank that (when properly managed) supplied the house with a steady supply of electricity even in our foggy coastal climate. Indeed, during statewide energy shortages and rolling blackouts that struck California in 2001, this independence from the grid became a source of substantial media interest, generating state-wide and national news coverage.[[19]](#footnote-19) Yet not long afterward, some were arguing that a newly feasible “grid intertie,” whereby the rooftop solar energy system put power back into the electrical grid while the house simultaneously drew its electricity from the grid, was a more “appropriate” system. In part, this discussion revolved around the comparative technical strengths of battery systems and grid reliance. Part of the assessment also entailed an evaluation of the embedded energy and toxicity of the batteries. But perhaps more vital was the question of just what sort of values these differing systems reflected. Among the most persuasive arguments to many was one that associated the batteries with *in*dependence and the grid with *inter*dependence. Framed in this manner, what had been a divided group coalesced around the “appropriateness” of acknowledging and modeling interdependence.

In roughly this same period, the organization confronted one of the most existential questions in its history. The house that was CCAT was within the planned footprint of a large new academic building slated for construction, a development the organization was powerless to prevent. As part of this building project, university officials proposed to move the organization to a house to be newly, and professionally, built for this purpose. After extensive consultation, discussion, and debate -- and to the surprise of many -- the organization turned down the offer of new construction. Instead, they chose to move the aging, existing house – with all its quirks, many student renovations, and extensive history – onto a new and more expansive foundation a short distance away. For those outside the organization (and some on the inside) who regarded CCAT first and foremost as a demonstration site for cutting-edge sustainable technologies, this decision was hard to fathom.

Yet as should already be clear, the organization’s primary identity was never rooted in this model. Instead, students, past and present, saw in the existing house *their* house, which reflected a deep attachment as well as a demonstration of their success in creating a sustainable household by building upon, and working with, what already exists rather than starting from scratch. Living in a home embedded with the labor and creativity of previous generations of students was not only valued by those from the past, but also by the then-current generation of students. Here, the decision reflects the understanding of home articulated by cultural geographers such as Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling, who argue that, “[h]ome… is a *place*, a site in which we live. But, more than this, home is also an idea and an imaginary that is imbued with feelings” and that ultimately it is “neither the dwelling nor the feeling, but the relation between the two.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Moreover, by working to improve what they had rather than building from scratch, CCAT actively chose to model the challenges involved promoting sustainability in existing homes and communities elsewhere, rather than modeling the technological possibilities available when designing upon a blank slate.

“Sure,” one might observe, “CCAT might be a home, of sorts, but it is hardly typical of the dynamics or challenges of many other homes and households.” A reasonable point, but this doesn’t cut as deeply as it might seem at first. First, like CCAT, many households are composed of unrelated members: 2010 census statistics in the U.S. identified nearly 34% as “nonfamily households,” including people living alone or nonrelatives living together.[[21]](#footnote-21) Second, like many other households, CCAT members return frequently, maintain ongoing connections, and remain invested in the preservation of its past, the vitality of its present, and promise of its future. In the end, it is to a large degree these familiar elements of home, more than the specific technologies operationalized on the site that make the organization lasting and significant.

When Langdon Winner critiqued the 1970s appropriate technology movement by describing the limits of its “mousetrap” theory of social change, he was only focusing in part upon the movement’s technological orientation itself. More urgently, he worried that it reflected a retreat into the private sphere and so an avoidance of difficult public challenges of power and politics. Appropriate technologists “…dropped out of political activity and began a certain kind of sociotechnical tinkering: roof gardens, solar collectors, and windmills.”[[22]](#footnote-22) This location in the private sphere led to an implicit faith in consumer choice – and the supposedly invisible hand of the marketplace – as the driver of change. As he put it:

People would, in effect, vote on the shape of the future through their consumer/builder choices. This notion of social change provided the underlying rationale for the amazing emphasis on do-it-yourself manuals, catalogues, demonstration sites, information sharing, and "networking" that characterized appropriate technology during its heyday.[[23]](#footnote-23)

CCAT is not immune to this sort of notion. Yet an apolitical retreat into the private is not consistent with the actual practice of the organization or those drawn to it, which intimates a different approach to change. Developing these contrasting approaches here will prove useful.

I have already suggested why this organization and its home cannot be properly understood as a mere display of technologies. Such a display would be largely static (or, would be upgraded at set intervals to incorporate advances in technology) and its builders would be largely invisible or irrelevant to its purpose – hence the question of whether students or professionals did the work would be unimportant, apart from questions of overall quality and aesthetics. In such a display home, visitors would be cast primarily as prospective consumers, exposed to staged demonstrations of gadgets and systems that they might later purchase or adopt for their own home. Interestingly, such a model would also encourage invisibility for the very technologies being demonstrated, just as these are invisible in conventional homes in postindustrial societies. The demonstration is most effective if solar electricity powers lights at the flip of a switch just as in “regular” houses. The kitchen sink could be connected to a grey-water marsh, but it would still drain water in the “usual” way. Here, green or appropriate technologies reduce resource usage for a given task, but are regarded as fixed goods to be consumed in a manner that minimizes visibility and impact upon household practices.

By contrast, I have argued here that CCAT is better understood as an experiment in living and an ongoing conversation. The “appropriateness” of the technologies and systems are not presented as fixed properties of ‘off-the-shelf’ products or designs, but are tentative assessments of the particular fit between particular strategies or systems, the character, location, and practices of those using the house itself, and the values embraced by the current generation of student leaders. These elements can be encompassed in a form of democratic citizenship, in which the conversation is always embedded in the experiment; that is, the material practices are always at the core of the reflective discussions, judgments, and decisions made.

Conversation and action emanate from student residents’ intimate participation in the complex assemblage of material systems and practices that encompass the household and home – including its surrounding gardens and other facilities. The spaces within and around the house are a hub for countless hands-on workshops, meetings, speakers, and other educational events, as well as volunteer workdays, concerts, and other performances. The line between “private” living space and “public” gathering spaces are subject to ongoing negotiation and change, but it is evident that both physically and metaphorically that line is fuzzy. Moreover, those who make the house their home do not simply maintain the house and program, nor even lead the organization.

The experience both of living with such a rich array of technologies, gardens, and other systems and of negotiating their preservation and development with fellow students is transformative for virtually all of them. With real-time monitors of their energy consumption, they become much more aware and knowledgeable about the sources and magnitudes of impact by various activities of daily life. By actually living comfortably with systems that allow them to minimize their ecological footprint, they are able to challenge narratives that equate such living with deprivation or loss. Yet – perhaps surprisingly – by living amidst technologies that remain outside the mainstream experience of many, they also become acutely aware that these are necessarily entwined with decisions and priorities about how to live well – a broad and apt definition of politics itself. The consequence of these experiences is that they not only act as organizational leaders, but become far more grounded, knowledgeable, and engaged citizens in the course of doing so.

As noted previously, Sherilyn MacGregor argues persuasively that much of women’s environmental activism is best conceptualized in the public language of citizenship rather than the private language of care. MacGregor argues that while the private roles of mother and care-giver are often deployed strategically by activists in this context, their engagement is rarely a straightforward reflection of these roles. Like the CCAT students, typically those drawn to the cause are transformed as they become active, public leaders. As Robert Gottlieb described,

Engagement in the movement… has often transformed how [these women] perceive their own identities as well. As organizers and leaders who become capable of questioning and challenging various sources of institutional power, many of the women in the antitoxics groups are transformed, in the eyes of others, into different people…[[24]](#footnote-24)

The fit between CCAT’s decidedly public character and both MacGregor and Gottlieb’s accounts is a good one. Those who have lived in the house have gone on to become planning directors and teachers, activists, community-supported farmers, NGO leaders, and policymakers. The home became a base for lives as active citizens rather than a retreat into private household practices or technological tinkering. In this sense, once again, and despite its many atypical characteristics, CCAT is suggestive of the never-purely-private character of home.

# Changing perceptions of the relationship between citizenship and consumption

The practical connection between household and citizen action found at CCAT is, I argue, broadly relevant. Yet much existing thinking and writing about citizens and consumers hampers our ability to conceive of and develop this connection. On the one hand, much theorizing about citizenship in general and environmental citizenship in particular posits a dichotomy between this and a private realm of consumption and the home. On the other hand, a fair amount of recent thinking and rhetoric seemingly conflates the roles of household consumer and citizen. I analyze both approaches here, in order to set the stage for the next section in which I sketch an alternative that takes the distinctively political qualities of citizenship seriously, while recognizing the ways these qualities can and have emerged from the material practices of the home.

Mark Sagoff has argued eloquently that most people think and act differently depending upon the role they conceive themselves playing. The result is that environmental challenges will be addressed very differently if we begin from the values we hold as public citizens than if we begin from the self-interested preferences we express as private consumers – either through our actual purchases in a marketplace or when queried by economists or pollsters about our willingness to pay for our preferences. Sagoff illustrates this claim, in one prominent example, by contrasting his university students’ opposition to developing a picturesque valley into a grand ski resort with their apparent eagerness to patronize the resort if it were nonetheless to be built.[[25]](#footnote-25) Rather than decrying his students’ hypocrisy or the incoherence of their positions, he argues that their likely consumer preference – to ski the valley if a resort is available – is simply not a measure of the same thing as their citizen valuation of the undeveloped valley. This is commonplace, Sagoff argues: citizens “may themselves condemn the likely consequences of their own consumer interests on cultural or ethical grounds.”[[26]](#footnote-26) He goes further, personalizing the argument by asserting that:

I love my car; I hate the bus. Yet I vote for candidates who promise to tax gasoline to pay for public transportation. I send my dues to the Sierra Club to protect areas in Alaska I shall never visit. And I support the work of the American League to Abolish Capital Punishment although, personally, I have nothing to gain one way or the other. (If I hang, I will hang myself.) And of course, I applaud the Endangered Species Act, although I have no earthly use for the Colorado squawfish or the Indiana bat. The political causes I support seem to have little or no basis in my interests as a consumer, because I take different points of view when I vote and when I shop. I have an "Ecology Now" sticker on a car that drips oil everywhere it's parked.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The point of this is (presumably!) not to encourage us to ignore oil leaks from our cars or – as Sagoff also claims to have done – to bribe a government official to fix traffic tickets.[[28]](#footnote-28) It is, instead, to argue that laws and regulations that express our citizen values are both legitimate and important precisely because they don’t reflect what we would otherwise choose as individual consumers. Written in the 1980s, when memory of the passage of the sweeping environmental legislation of the early 1970s was still relatively fresh – yet under attack – such an approach offered a powerful justification for such laws. Today, when my own students read Sagoff’s account, they – like me – still find his conceptual distinction between consumer and citizen roles illuminating. Yet at the same time many are both surprised and troubled by his account of the disparity in these expressed views – by his students and by him.

Two related changes may help explain their perception. First, the notion that far-reaching environmental legislation could be adopted despite explicitly conflicting with self-interested consumer preferences strikes many of my students as unlikely if not implausible. Why wouldn’t it? Few if any examples of ambitious legislation of this sort have been adopted in their lifetime in the U.S. and popular explanations for the more recent failures of legislation on climate change often explicitly point to opposition based upon consumer preferences.[[29]](#footnote-29) Second, the idea that a concerned environmentalist would or even could ignore the manifold opportunities and consumer products designed to allow for the individual exercise of their values – from energy-efficient light bulbs and reusable bags to recycling, solar panels, fair- trade or locally grown foods – seems to them to require willful avoidance. None of us are saints, my students declare, but the litany of personal behaviors that Sagoff presents strikes many of them not only as hypocritical but arrogant.

Writing more recently than Sagoff, Michael Maniates noticed the shift that I’m describing here. Maniates diagnoses the evident growth of green consumer products and services in the 1990s and beyond as a reflection of an “individualization of responsibility” that both narrows the “environmental imagination” and displaces the possibilities for public, citizen action.[[30]](#footnote-30) It narrows our imagination, Maniates argues, by excluding all those possibilities that require laws or collective action for their realization. Individual consumers might chose to purchase a hybrid car, for example, but they cannot create adequate bicycle or public transit infrastructure through market choice alone. A singular focus on consumer choices displaces the difficult and uncertain work of citizen action to achieve such possibilities by offering the false promise of an easy way to “make a difference.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Despite these differences, the sense that public citizenship stands in contrast to private consumerism is shared by both authors; both also point to the promise of the former over the latter. Yet these shared perspectives have been called into question within the growing discussion of “green,” “ecological,” or “environmental” citizenship over the past decade.

As noted at the outset of this chapter, Andrew Dobson has sought to radically re-conceptualize citizenship by bringing it “home,” arguing that meaningful environmental action requires drawing the private sphere of the household into the ostensibly public sphere of citizenship. For Dobson, this “ecological citizenship” was an inclusive move that entails a radical departure from dominant liberal and republican conceptions of citizenship.[[32]](#footnote-32) While Dobson’s incorporation of home within a conception of citizenship remains promising, in the hands of many subsequent scholars and (especially) practitioners it appears to have morphed into a presumption that private individualism and green consumerism is a – perhaps *the* – primary manifestation of citizenship itself. Rather than publicizing private household practices, this appears as the privatization and individualization of the concept of citizenship. In this sense, environmental citizenship has come to “represent growing interest among scholars, policy practitioners and NGOs in the roles that *individuals* can, do and should play,”[[33]](#footnote-33) and reflects a growing equivalence between citizenship and consumption. This has become so commonplace that Sherilyn MacGregor is able to conclude that “consumption… is now central to visions of environmental citizenship.”[[34]](#footnote-34) From the analytical perspective of Sagoff and Maniates, there is a ‘through the looking glass’ quality to this new equivalence, highlighted by another recent critic who is able to characterize contemporary notions of environmental *citizenship* as “individualising environmental responsibility” -- precisely the language that Maniates had earlier used to critique green *consumption*.[[35]](#footnote-35)

There is thus good reason to worry that attention to the role of home-making is one that exacerbates the tendency toward an individualization of responsibility. The limitations of micro-level, individualized consumer actions as leading to macro-level, social change needs to be taken very seriously. Yet my argument builds upon the distinction drawn from the discussion of CCAT: between home as a private, apolitical site for the consumption of new technologies (“mousetraps”) versus home as a negotiated site in which such technologies and their adoption facilitate conversation and experiment. The centrality of home to everyday life invites a more nuanced consideration of its potential to generate broader forms of political action.

# Politicizing Material Practices of Home

1. **Home as haven**

The dominant conception of home today -- in the US and many other post-industrial societies – approximates what Dolores Hayden has termed the “home as haven.”[[36]](#footnote-36) Envisioned in the nineteenth century as a self-contained private refuge for a nuclear family nurtured by the wife and mother, “the spatial envelope for all of this exclusive nurturing was a little cottage in a garden.”[[37]](#footnote-37) It is really since the mid-twentieth century that this conception – often manifest as the suburban house built as a part of a large-scale, sprawling development of similar houses in a community dependent upon automobility – became fully manifest. Although this form of development is particularly associated with the U.S. and Australia – where over half the population now lives in suburbs – manifestations can also be found throughout North America, Europe, and increasingly around the world.[[38]](#footnote-38)

There have been many critics of the sprawling landscape of so-called “greenfield” development (that is, building houses on the farmland, fields, or forests at the periphery of existing cities and towns) in recent decades. Critics have charged suburban sprawl with fostering a sense of placelessness, aesthetic violence, and anomie.[[39]](#footnote-39) They have also highlighted concerns about growing commuting times, lack of public facilities and services, destruction of agricultural and wildlands, and dramatically expanded energy consumption and environmental impact.[[40]](#footnote-40) These criticisms have also led to counter-movements that emphasize designs that foster walkability and integration of business and residential uses, as well as in-fill and transit-oriented development. In the US, these efforts are often captured under the labels “new urbanism” and “smart growth.”[[41]](#footnote-41) While these efforts have gained some purchase in the US and both reflect and have encouraged a renewed attraction of urban living, the juggernaut of low-density, monocultural, sprawling development has continued to expand its footprint.[[42]](#footnote-42) Fueled by subprime mortgages and other “creative” financing instruments in the years leading up to the 2008 economic crash, little seems changed as home building has revived more recently.

A similar double movement characterizes the practices taking place within these homes. On the one hand, we can identify much evidence of household practices that seek to reduce its ecological impact. On the other, the cultural and economic preoccupation with home improvement and consumption – fueled by the growing sector of stores, products, services and media cultivating an expanded conception of the ideal home – has also grown considerably in recent years.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Envisioning meaningful alternatives that would cut more deeply into this juggernaut first requires that we recognize some of the attractions – both for those who live in these homes and those who aspire to do so.[[44]](#footnote-44) These can entail a sense of safety and security, privacy, control, and equity that might be facilitated by choosing the private home as a consumer commodity.[[45]](#footnote-45) Yet the closer we look at the practices of home and household, the less they fit the conception of an autonomous private haven that many imagine. Once we move beyond this conception, we can imagine new possibilities that draw together practices in the home and citizenship.

1. **Citizenship and the Home: 3 Aspects**

Home is not a wholly private realm disconnected from the public. Both materially and conceptually, it is embedded in a web of connections with the outside. I focus here on the way that our material experiences as home dwellers are an important subject of citizenship in general and of citizen action to promote sustainability in particular. We must recognize that the public and citizenship already has a place here. Advancing this claim requires being clear about its distance from familiar notions of green lifestyle consumerism. These are imbued with privilege, often appealing primarily to that so-called post-materialist population who have the financial resources, time, and inclination to seek out these products and services.[[46]](#footnote-46) Moreover, conceiving of environmental action in terms of household purchases shifts the onus to individuals – and most often to women.[[47]](#footnote-47) Unlike those who equate environmental citizenship and consumption, I aim to reinforce the distinctiveness of citizenship in a society where it is already often devalued. There are at least three distinct senses in which citizenship emerges in relation to home.

First, familiar public notions of citizenship have long been connected with the home. Fiona Allon is quite correct that “home and home ownership in particular have long existed as powerful forces for individual and collective identity formation and self-definition, playing a crucial role in constructions of citizenship and national identity…"[[48]](#footnote-48) Normative weight has often been attributed to this point, asserting that stable home dwellers and especially owners possess the deep ties to the fate of the polity that make them good citizens. Historically, of course, claims of this sort have been the basis for excluding non-owners from rights of citizenship, such as voting. Yet the point is equally salient for critics such as David Harvey, who characterize home ownership – and especially mortgage-holding – as a means to pacify the citizenry:

The suburbanization of the United States was not merely a matter of new infrastructures… It also altered the political landscape, as subsidized home-ownership for the middle classes changed the focus of community action towards the defence of property values and indi­vidualized identities, turning the suburban vote towards conservative republicanism. Debt-encumbered homeowners, it was argued, were less likely to go on strike.[[49]](#footnote-49)

With regard to practices within the household, feminist theorists have long and rightly insisted upon their integral connection to citizenship. The distribution of roles played by adults within the household have a substantial effect upon the ability of these adults to attend, participate in, and contribute to governmental meetings; to lodge complaints against public officials; to participate in community organizations or protests; and to become involved in other conventionally recognized forms of public discourse and citizenship. To the extent that women working outside the home are frequently assumed to be primarily responsible for a “second shift” as primary caregivers and housekeepers within the home, either because of a gendered division of responsibility within the household or because they lead a single-parent household, their participation in these forms of citizenship will be more constrained than many men’s. Moreover, the relationships and practices within the home are a vital crucible for the cultivation of future citizens – children.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Second, there is a critical and often unrecognized sense in which the material environment of our homes and neighborhoods shapes, enables, and constrains participation in public life as citizens. Thad Williamson has drawn upon substantial empirical data to show how low-density sprawling communities – despite what he acknowledges as their considerable attractions and benefits for many – are “also constituent of a way of life that prioritizes privatism and consumerism over engaged political participation and ecological sustainability.”[[51]](#footnote-51) Higher density residential development, by contrast, can encourage a different set of priorities. In a complementary fashion, Dolores Hayden highlights the many ways in which the home designed as a haven has required a tremendous – yet neither inevitable nor unavoidable – amount of time devoted to household and caring practices, primarily by women. Only by recognizing this can we begin to envision alternative conceptions of home that result in a more widely shared responsibility for these practices. Far from being the singular or natural formation for everyday practices including cooking, cleaning, and dependent-care, Hayden demonstrates that both this formation and alternatives have a particular history that can be traced back to the nineteenth century.

Alternatives that Hayden describes as embodying a “neighborhood strategy” are those in which household practices, as well as appliances for cooking, cleaning, and maintenance, can be shared collectively, thus lessening the time and financial burden on any single individual or household.[[52]](#footnote-52) In the twenty-first century, this strategy finds expression in alternative models of home and neighborhood design, including co-housing projects, where private living space is conjoined with a kitchen and other facilities to be used collectively -- for shared meals several times weekly, shared child-care, garden, or recreational facilities, and shared bedrooms available for guests.[[53]](#footnote-53) Hayden, along with other architects, planners, and developers, has also envisioned practical ways in which the widespread, existing low-density suburban housing block can be (and has been) re-imagined and re-structured to meet the needs of a more diverse population, by carving out existing, privately owned, yard space for common activities such as child- or elder-care, laundry, food gardens, or shared kitchens, as well as options for small accessory apartments for single residents or couples -- adult children, elders, or tenants.[[54]](#footnote-54) It also finds growing expression in the so-called “sharing economy” – a rapidly growing array of (often internet-mediated) networks for sharing bicycles, cars, and – increasingly – housing, home appliances, cooking, errands, and other household tasks.[[55]](#footnote-55) While some of the most prominent of these networks are for-profit enterprises (airbnb.com; zipcar; taskrabbit.com; etc.), many others are organized as not-for-profit peer-to-peer initiatives.[[56]](#footnote-56) To the extent that infrastructure or networks facilitate sharing of household responsibilities, they have great potential to both lessen time poverty and the sense that such roles are distinctly individual and private ones.

Home, then, is connected to citizenship of *some* sort. Recognizing this, we can attend more thoughtfully to the ways in which both household practices and the physical structuring of houses and the built environment itself can constrain or enable different manifestations of citizenship – both in general and for specific groups within these environments. To argue that citizenship has a place in the home is not necessarily to argue that it has a constructive place – it can also weaken or constrain public participation and discourse. These effects are also vital to the shaping of citizens and citizenship.

In both of these senses, the link between home and citizenship challenges familiar, arguably dominant, conceptualizations of purely *private* homes. It does little, however, to reconstruct notions of *citizenship*. Active citizens, here, are envisioned in conventional ways – as people with the time, inclination, and privilege to participate in public discourse: to educate themselves as voters, to attend public meetings, join civil society organizations, protest, and engage in internet activism. The focus has been on various ways in which citizen action is necessarily embedded in everyday practices of home, and so upon the ways in which these practices *condition or* *shape* – as well as constrain or enable – citizenship. There is another sense, however, in which home can be understood as integral to citizenship, but in this case we need to expand what we understand by citizenship as well as how we understand the home.

This third sense of citizenship emerges when we observe that the home can be, and often has been, a physical space for the exercise of citizenship itself: both as object and as subject. Sherilyn MacGregor draws this conclusion from her interviews with numerous activist women:

Activism is typically associated with activities in the public domain. Yet the association of activism and publicity (and the concomitant depoliticization of the private sphere) is challenged when women choose to regard household issues as political issues and thereby make their homes a focus for their activist engagement. Their homes are both the base for their public activism (i.e., "command central") and a place where political action and conversation takes place.[[57]](#footnote-57)

Here home is an object and venue for citizenship. Even more significantly, MacGregor notes that it is also a *subject* (making political issues of household practices and material conditions). Historians Vanessa Taylor and Frank Trentmann offer different illustrations of household practices becoming the basis for citizenship in Victorian England. Here, the demand for a continuous and affordable flow of water into the home became a central political demand of increasingly well-organized citizens.[[58]](#footnote-58) As their study concludes:

…instead of bifurcating private and public, new practices—like running a bath or turning on the tap—came to channel political energy between these worlds. Conflicts over the legitimacy and scope of ‘domestic’ use had, by the end of the nineteenth century, broadened into a politics of entitlement and provision in times of scarcity. The material politics of everyday life played a vital role in expanding the mode of politics from taxation to provision.[[59]](#footnote-59)

Citizenship, here, engages the materiality of the household and emerges from our experience with this.[[60]](#footnote-60) The focus on provision reflects the transformation of a social and material question into a political claim, reflecting Hanna Pitkin’s argument that social questions must not be excluded from public life, but must enter in the right “spirit.”[[61]](#footnote-61)

 The possibilities for politicizing the material practices of the home are more expansive than we often recognize, in part because these practices are less fixed and subject to far more change than we often recognize. As Witold Rybczynski has observed, for example, the explicit notion of “comfort” as a goal or even criteria of the home and household does not appear to have emerged in Europe until the eighteenth century.[[62]](#footnote-62) Relatedly, the notion of the home as a private haven would have made little sense in a society where homes were frequently regarded as also places of work – as artisans or merchants, for example – and where even bourgeois houses often contained more than one family.[[63]](#footnote-63) Such dramatic changes are not just those that have taken place over centuries.

Standards of comfort, cleanliness, and convenience have changed dramatically over just the past several decades. As Elisabeth Shove makes clear, “meanings of comfort and cleanliness do not represent free-floating expressions of personal preference.”[[64]](#footnote-64) As practices, they emerge at the confluence of innovation and diffusion of technologies with evolving cultural norms regarding usage. For example, what is regarded as a “normal” and comfortable indoor air temperature has changed radically with the rise of central heating and air-conditioning and the concomitant changes toward year-round light-weight clothing in many places. Moreover, where diverse cultural criteria for comfort used to be commonplace, the trajectory is toward increasing uniformity.[[65]](#footnote-65) Similar accounts have been offered of dramatic change in other household practices including bathing or showering and clothes washing. Perhaps most striking in these accounts is the ways in which change has occurred not simply in terms of frequency or quantity (e.g., bathing times per week; pounds of laundry washed) but in terms of the very purposes of these activities (for example, whether clothes need to be washed in order to remove dirt or stains from the outside; sweat or bodily odors from the inside; to disinfect; or to refresh the shape or fit).[[66]](#footnote-66) Simply promoting greater resource efficiency of technology will not alter these practices, and can simply encourage more usage. This leads Shove to conclude that cultivating a greater diversity of understandings of comfort, convenience, and cleanliness is among the most significant changes that can reduce the resource consumption of household practices.[[67]](#footnote-67) It is in this sense that “green” practices might open these up to differing perspectives on their importance, a sense that they are not “merely” private practices and choices, but ones that have important public consequences. There is increasing empirical evidence that this is the case; that rather than thinking of practices of consumption as either equivalent to or an alternative to practices of citizenship, they are complementary.[[68]](#footnote-68)

Finally, it is a characteristic of modern homes that – although conceived as a private sphere identified with materiality – this very materiality is nonetheless hidden from view. Maria Kaika has shown convincingly that the modern home is conceived “through a dual practice of exclusion: through ostracizing the undesired social as well as the undesired natural elements and processes.”[[69]](#footnote-69) Socially, she notes, homes are envisioned to exclude all undesired or uninvited others. Naturally, they are envisioned as excluding “dust, cold or polluted air, rain, dirt, sewerage, smog, etc.”[[70]](#footnote-70) These material forms of exclusion – through door locks and adequate roofing, for example – are key to our very idea of home. Yet the engineering of complex urban infrastructure that distinguish modern homes are designed to provide a flow of water, gas, and electricity into the home and systems of sewage and sanitation for the material removal of “waste” out of the home, as well as new standards of public health and expectations of cleanliness.[[71]](#footnote-71)

While forms of exclusion may be central to all homes, the deep dependence of the material construction of the home upon social and natural processes is particularly obscured or hidden in the modern home. As Kaika notes, the nature that is excluded from the home is a “bad” nature – dust, dirt, insects, rain, and cold. Yet the home is reliant upon the inclusion of a “good” nature – clean water, fresh air, various forms of energy. Kaika observes, “the function of the modern home as safe and autonomous is predicated not only upon the exclusion of bad nature from its premises, but also upon the visual exclusion of the networks and social relations that produce and transport good nature into the domestic and pump bad nature back into the urban domain…”[[72]](#footnote-72) While we conceive the home as a boundary between inside and outside, the often unacknowledged reality is that it is “a porous membrane” that controls the interaction between these two.[[73]](#footnote-73) Indeed for many, feeling at home relies upon "remaining unfamiliar with the socio-natural networks that produce domesticity…"[[74]](#footnote-74)

In *this* context, explicitly attending to these socio-natural networks – whether by choice or necessity – can be the basis for a citizenly engagement and participation with the world in which the home is situated. Kaika concludes,

Demonstrating the ideological construction of private spaces as autonomous and disconnected and insisting on their material and social connections calls for an end to individualization, fragmentation and disconnectedness that are looked for within the bliss of one's home. It calls for engaging in political and social action, which is, almost invariably, decidedly public.[[75]](#footnote-75)

The awareness cultivated by attention to the materiality of the home – how and how much energy and water is consumed, and for what purposes; what products are brought into the home and how much of it is re-generated as waste; how this waste is disposed of – can lead not only to changes in household practices, but the sort of intimate and experiential understanding of these material flows that can inform and prompt broader forms of collective action.

 None of this makes sense unless it is clear that the everyday material practices of the household – care, provisioning, social reproduction – cannot be reduced to the role of a consumer.[[76]](#footnote-76) It can be the basis for collaborative action rather than merely the expression of individual consumer preferences. While the former create opportunities for easing and improving the quality of household practices and so everyday life, the latter entail choices that aim primarily to assuage a sense of individual guilt or responsibility. The mere aggregation of “simple” individual acts by self-conscious consumers will not affect the large scale social changes necessary and relabeling this as citizenship does nothing to change this. However, if instead we see the ongoing engagement with “greening” the home as challenging the sense of inevitability and naturalism of household practices, then they can play a significant role in foregrounding and thus politicizing and restructuring these everyday material relations. Moreover, by recognizing home dwelling as a practice, we can understand it in ways that transcends the individualism of a purely market-based, consumer-oriented response. This opens up new opportunities for these practices to become the subject of collaborative or collective citizen attention and action.

In sum, the materiality of home, in all the manifestations discussed here, shapes, constrains, and enables the participation and citizenship of household members. While authors like Winner, Maniates, and Luke are quite right to warn against regarding individual consumer choices as a viable basis for constructive social change, we are not thereby entitled to ignore the ways in which the supposedly private household both shapes and constrains the opportunity for public citizen action. Citizenship is at stake in the home, whether “green” practices are employed or not. By recognizing this we can imagine and create opportunities for citizens to politicize home practices and thereby explore and experiment with new ways of living well.

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23. Ibid., 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*, 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
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26. Ibid., 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
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31. Tim Luke’s take-down of green consumerism remains among the best: *Ecocritique: Contesting the Politics of Nature, Economy, and Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 116–136. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Dobson, *Citizenship and the Environment*, 83–139 See further discussion of Dobson’s argument in Chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Kersty Hobson, “On the Making of the Environmental Citizen,” *Environmental Politics* 22, no. 1 (February 2013): 58, doi:10.1080/09644016.2013.755388. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Sherilyn MacGregor, “Ecological Citizenship,” in *Handbook of Political Citizenship and Social Movements*, ed. H-A van der Heijden (Edward Elgar, forthcoming), 11 DRAFT. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
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37. Ibid., 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
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39. In addition to previous sources, see J.H. Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America’s Man-Made Landscape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Anthony Flint, *This Land: The Battle over Sprawl and the Future of America* (JHU Press, 2008), 49–58. Another strand of criticism, especially in the US, has focused on the economic and racial exclusivity of many suburbs. Yet here the picture has changed substantially in recent years, with US suburbs, overall, now having levels of both poverty and racial diversity as high as or higher than cities: Myron Orfield and Thomas Luce, *America’s Racially Diverse Suburbs: Opportunities and Challenges*, July 20, 2012, http://www.law.umn.edu/uploads/e0/65/e065d82a1c1da0bfef7d86172ec5391e/Diverse\_Suburbs\_FINAL.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
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43. Allon, *Renovation Nation*. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Cannavò, *The Working Landscape*, 97–98. Joel Kotkin, “The Triumph of Suburbia,” *Newgeography.com*, April 29, 2013, http://www.newgeography.com/content/003667-the-triumph-suburbia. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
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