



1938 & Beyond: The Re-gendering of Real Estate Brokerage

By **JEFFREY M. HORNSTEIN**

This article is part one of a two-part series.

“Stay out of real estate,” one of the town’s leading citizens advised Laura Hale Gorton. “If there was a living in it, I’m quite certain that a man would have tried it years ago!”

The world seemed pretty gloomy to Gorton in 1931, and this admonition undoubtedly provided no consolation. Recently widowed, supporting two young daughters and a large home with a mortgage, she possessed no special training yet had to earn a living for her family.

Intrepidly ignoring the warning, Gorton acquired a real estate license and opened an office in Glastonbury, CT. She figured: “[I would] sell that which I know best and believe in — my community” to people “seeking a home in the country and a pleasant neighborhood in which to bring up their children.”

In 1952, she handed over the business to her nephew, and in retirement she looked “with deep satisfaction” on “hundreds of homes, miles of streets winding through hills and a booming shopping center,” a “monument to her vision and courage.”

She was among the earliest members of the Women’s Council of the National

Association of Real Estate Boards (today WCR), founded in 1938 by the leadership of the national association to help women brokers establish firm footing in the profession. Gorton became national president of the Women’s Council in 1948...

Like many women in her field and in business in general, Gorton had entered the working world after losing her husband. While Gorton was typical of women entering the real estate field in the 1920s and ‘30s, real estate women contrasted sharply with the mainstream of the female labor force.

In 1930, 45 percent of the nearly 30,000 women in real estate were married, 39 percent were widowed or divorced and 16 percent were single. In contrast, less than 26 percent of the overall white female workforce was married in 1930, nearly 60 percent was single and 15 percent was widowed or divorced.

In terms of age distribution, real estate women were also atypical: at 45, Gorton was 15 years older than the average female worker. Nearly 70 percent of women in real estate in 1940 were 45 or older, compared with less than 25 percent in the labor force as a whole.

In short, women in real estate in the 1930s and ‘40s looked much like the female labor force as a whole in the 1960s and beyond.

Creating a Women’s Space in Real Estate

In the mid-1920s, male REALTORS® began to examine the place of women in real estate. The annual convention in 1925 featured a panel entitled “Women as Board Members.” The three participants of the quasi-debate were all men.

The chairman of the panel, Harvey Humphrey, secretary of the realty board in Fresno, CA, set the tone, arguing that women REALTORS® on his board not only excelled at business, besting men in a recent home-selling contest in his city, but had a special role to play, particularly on the Pacific Coast, as guardians of “aesthetic beauty” in efforts to preserve and control ocean beaches. He called upon closed boards to “take cognizance” of women’s achievements and admit them to full membership...

On the negative side of the debate, Pierce Jones of the venerable Chicago Real Estate Board — which refused membership to women until 1950 — presented an exceptionally anemic case, and he knew it.

Jones argued that because the board’s headquarters was the “favorite club” of male REALTORS®, supplying members with such facilities as Turkish baths, barbershops and smoking rooms, and since building equivalent facilities for women would be prohibitively

expensive considering the small number of women who might join any given board, it would be unfair to women to allow them to join at this point...

The flimsiness of his case notwithstanding, Jones represented the mainstream view among male brokers in the East and Midwest. With the exception of a few boards in Florida, in New Jersey and on Long Island, female membership was disproportionately low east of the Rocky Mountains, and many of the larger and more prominent boards excluded women as a matter of policy.

The story on the West Coast was quite different. Women held prominent positions in local boards as well as in the powerful California Real Estate Association in the early 1920s.

The Beginning of WCR

The vast majority of articles by women brokers in the *National Real Estate Journal* in the 1920s purported to give “the Woman’s Angle” on real estate. Louise Slocomb, a “Realtress” of Portland, OR, contended that women possessed “certain qualities” making them “peculiarly fit” for the profession.

“Women’s intuition” helped the woman REALTOR® to “enter into the prospect’s psychology, to grasp the situation quickly and thoroughly” and once the situation was grasped, to use her “sharp wit” and “readiness to grasp detail” to “make the best of a given situation”...

In the context of popular culture’s discovery of the New Woman in the early 1920s, and the anxiety that it provoked, real estate women trod lightly, taking care not to appear too aggressively intrusive into the presumptive male world. Perhaps worried that men reading the *National Real Estate Journal* in the 1920s might feel threatened by their entry into the real estate field, women REALTORS® were almost always quick to declare that they were “not seeking to deprive men of their laurels” nor “trying to take unto themselves masculine prerogatives”...

Thus in the 1920s, women’s claims for participation in the masculine world of real estate were almost invariably framed in terms of the inherent qualities that distinguished them from men. Women, it almost went without saying, were “extremely well fitted to sell homes”...

Unfortunately, the Great Depression almost drove women out of real estate altogether. About two-thirds of female brokers left the field between 1930 and 1940, and the economic crisis devastated the ranks of women REALTORS®. In search of new members, the leadership of the national association, Executive Secretary Herbert U. Nelson and President Joseph Catherine in particular, turned toward women, actively encouraging the formation of WCR in 1938.

WCR was initially intended to make women feel more comfortable in the masculine environment of the annual conventions, by holding separate gatherings for female brokers and saleswomen. Nelson envisioned not a separate organization — such was not needed, he claimed, because most local boards did admit women — but an annual gathering that could enable “real estate women to get acquainted.”

Nelson told the 40 or so women gathered at the initial meeting of the convention in Milwaukee in 1938 that an “informal” women’s organization within the association would “aid the real estate calling by helping to raise the standards of practice and ethics and advancing the national association’s educational program”...

The chairwoman of the meeting, Cora Ella Wright, suggested that one function of a women’s council might be to conduct research with respect to laws affecting women’s property rights. Echoing Nelson and Catherine, she asserted that women would “promote higher standards of business procedure and ethics,” naturally.

Participants in the first meeting revealed a wide range of experience and aspirations. Several women had

founded their own real estate firms, others worked their way up through the ranks of established real estate companies, a few transferred skills learned in another business to real estate. Many had been active in real estate organizations on the local and state levels, and a handful had served as presidents of local boards.

The women REALTORS® shared a sense of accomplishment through real estate. Strikingly, though, nearly every woman at the meeting referred to men. Some had drawn the men in their lives into the business with them, while others had been pulled into the business by their husbands or brothers, either by partnership or posthumously.

Elva Cofer, of Portland, OR, reported that she was “in charge of 17 men” and believed that “women should cooperate more actively with men and seek their advice.” Maude M. Butler of Tulsa told her colleagues that she had “been building houses ranging from \$5,000 to \$12,500,” having become a member of the Tulsa Board “at the invitation of the men.” Henrietta T. White of Los Angeles noted that in her city, where the board had long accepted women as members, separate women’s meetings had allowed women to “open up” more than they would do in the board’s regular, male-dominated meetings.

The inaugural meeting of WCR provided an important space in which women REALTORS® could come into their own. The laughter and camaraderie led one participant to claim, “My whole viewpoint with respect to real estate changed. Not only did I get more commissions. I got more pleasure out of my work,” thanks to the Women’s Council.

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1938 & Beyond: The Re-gendering of Real Estate Brokerage—Part II

By **JEFFREY M. HORNSTEIN**

This article is part two of a two-part series.

Though the national REALTOR® association's membership began to rebound after hitting rock-bottom in 1935, in the years leading up to the Second World War the organization was financially strapped, and the Women's Council was not a priority. Even the most supportive men, such as Executive Secretary Herbert U. Nelson, saw the council as a mere "device for letting the women get together at conventions," not as any sort of incipient institution or formal division.

Yet the annual gatherings attracted large groups of women because they provided a social space that had not existed in the past. Mary Avery, a REALTOR® from Miami, told Nelson in late December 1940 that the demand for a formal women's division was growing.

"A great many women are not at ease in the presence of men either in business or socially," she noted. "These same women will speak up very definitely in a women's setting and in a women's group do a lot of good work and get a lot of pleasure out of it."

Questions About WCR's Role

A woman REALTOR®'s consciousness was stirring, but it was a divided consciousness. The founding members of the Women's Council were split over their long-range objectives: was it self-liquidation and assimilation into the "malestream," or was it creating a "women's world" within the profession? Were women REALTORS® supposed to assimilate into the professional culture as established by the real estate men who had founded the national association, or was there to be a "women's way" of doing real estate?

At first, the latter, business maternalist view predominated, though with some subtle twists. Inviting women brokers to attend the Women's Council meeting at the NAREB convention in Los Angeles in 1939, Cora Wright (1938-39 WCR National President) stressed the opportunity to "cash in on the women's angle" in real estate practice. During the meeting in Philadelphia in 1940, the Women's Council pledged itself to increase the membership of the national association and to support fully the new Urban Land Institute in its advocacy of private enterprise solutions to the problem of urban blight.

At the same meeting, they discussed "why women naturally specialized"

in residential real estate. Yet President Newton C. Farr, whose hometown Chicago Real Estate Board remained closed to women, found himself in hostile territory when he insinuated that women tended to dabble in the business rather than take it on full time.

He was met by jeers and heckling from the all-woman audience, who asked him why an unethical and part-time male broker should be eligible to apply for membership in the esteemed Chicago board while a full-time, ethical female broker was not. The Second World War would provide a new context in which women REALTORS® could advance claims for inclusion on more equalitarian grounds.

Rosie the REALTOR®

On the eve of the American entry into the Second World War, nearly 12 million American women were in the paid labor force, accounting for one-fourth of all workers. At the zenith of the war mobilization in 1944, for the first time in history married women outnumbered single women in the work force.

As in many other sectors of the economy, the mobilization for war had drawn women into the real estate field to fill the gaps left by men drafted into military service. Local Women's Councils of REALTORS® proliferated during the war, and real estate boards

that accepted women garnered many new female members.

In sharp contrast to other sectors of the economy, women remained in the real estate business after the war. While men's participation in the field increased about 20 percent between 1940 and 1950, women's participation increased by 97 percent. This change reflected the major shift in the postwar decade of women into what government statisticians called the Financial, Insurance and Real Estate (FIRE) sector. While women constituted 33.6 percent of FIRE workers in 1940, they were 44.3 percent in 1950 — the largest structural shift by gender of the decade.

Other industries returned to their pre-war gender distributions, but the distribution in the FIRE sector shifted permanently. Women who entered the world of paid labor for the first time during the Second World War flocked to the manufacturing sector in the greatest numbers, and for the duration of the war they dramatically changed the gender distribution in that sector. But by 1950, the occupational structure had returned to the pre-war norm of segregation on the basis of sex.

However, in real estate, as well as in sales and clerical work, there was not only a "significant increase in females within the category" but also "a trend for women to enter formerly male" occupations such as real estate. While Rosie the Riveter is well known, she was short-lived. Rosie the REALTOR® was one of the permanent legacies of the war.

A Divided Consciousness

The history of real estate women is the history of the divided consciousness of the twentieth-century middle-class womanhood: independent women grounded their claims to economic participation both in liberal notions of equality and maternalistic ideas of women's special role in society.

Early in the war years, women REALTORS® began to assert vigorous claims for full and equal membership

in the profession. The transcript of the Women's Council meeting in Detroit in 1941 provides an extraordinary record of the shift from business maternalism to a vigorous liberal individualism, in the context of the war mobilization.

The first of two keynote speakers, Herbert U. Nelson, opened with a notable, unabashedly confessional address, "Visual Nuisances and Their Effects on Real Estate." He proceeded to make a case for a campaign against ugliness by drawing analogies with other nuisances: "We recognize that you can't put a boiler factory where people have to sleep and eat, but we go on year after year tolerating billboards and outdoor advertising, which is just as destructive of amenity values." He implored the women to join his crusade.

As if in ironic, almost mocking, response to Nelson's earnest, sensitive male petition, Mary Amelia Warren, a young and ambitious REALTOR® from California, used the women's space to deliver a rousing, sometimes sarcastic, though never nasty address decrying male superiority and sketching a plan for a female invasion of residential real estate. She began with a brief gloss on the Darwinian struggle for women brokers to survive the Depression by working harder than men, by conducting themselves in real estate on the basis of knowledge gained from the imperative for household economizing in the 1930s.

"All through the beautifully dead past," Warren said, "when men were doing the house choosing, the majority of houses changed hands because one man convinced another 'this is a real buy.'" But in the new world of the 1940s, things were different. Of course women were interested in construction. "They demand that a house be adequately built."

But reflecting the new sensibilities of the age of consumption, Warren

asserted, "The majority of them are more interested in liking the house for 20 years than watching it endure for 100." The message was clear: women's values — consumer values — had become the engine of the economy.

"I'd rather deal with a woman." This new slogan for women REALTORS® was tantamount to a new strategy for women real estate brokers: to capitalize on society's general assumptions. "Throughout history, womankind has been credited with the virtues of gentleness, honesty, sincerity and unselfishness. Whether we actually possess these attributes in undue measure would be a subject of academic interest. But tradition has endowed us, and being human, we've striven to merit the reputation.

"The man customer likes to deal with a woman in real estate," Warren continued, "for several reasons. If he has a wife or female relatives, he assumes that a woman will know better what they would like. Then, once he's made your acquaintance, he's amazed and delighted to find someone who can handle business like a man and still make him feel like a superior being."

"I'd rather deal with a woman," was a perfect collapse of the commercial motives and gendered morality that separate spheres were intended precisely to avoid. Victorian women did not "deal," at least not so obviously, or in those terms. Women REALTORS®, at least some of them, appropriated the vestiges of Victorian ideology for their own purposes, playing ironically with the language to cash in on stereotypes.

'We Must Council'

But alas, there was a dark side to the story of feminine progress in real estate. "The male animal fears women in business," Warren seethed. Perhaps because they are "doing pretty well" in their new roles, in many offices male

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brokers “permit” women to “draw in the business, initiate sales and work out most of the details,” and then have men step in at the last minute to close the transaction.

Warren related an anecdote about a female rental agent who had taken some prospective renters out to see an apartment when she discovered that they were actually interested in buying the entire building. She rushed the people back to the office to meet a salesman, only to find him missing. “No doubt he’d just run out for a haircut.”

The agent took them back out to thoroughly inspect the property and piqued their interest enough that by the time they returned to the office, they were ready to place a deposit.

By this time, the salesman was back, “so he graciously stepped in, gave the

customers the usual receipt to bind the deal and ‘earned’ his commission.”

“Why are we attending a meeting of the Women’s Council?” she continued. “For socialibility? To be sure! But besides just the pleasure of women’s solidarity, we must council!” That was the true task of the Women’s Council, to Warren and her allies: for them to use the women’s space to inspire each other, to convince each other “we belong” and to construct a female business identity.

She implored her fellow women REALTORS® to take advantage of their historically conditioned talents for accommodation and compromise and to “believe in the essential soundness of the scheme of things,” to remain the moral foundation of American society.

“The effective way to inspire

other women is to be, yourself, an outstanding success! I’d rather deal with a woman!” she closed to an ovation by more than 100 astonished and inspired women brokers. The transcript made no note as to whether Nelson remained in the room during the speech, but it was reprinted in the *National Real Estate Journal*, to be read by the entire membership of the national association.

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