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Dissertation

**DISCIPLINE AND POLISH:
DESIGNING THE “FAMILY SYSTEM” AT
THE CONNECTICUT INDUSTRIAL SCHOOL FOR GIRLS,
1868-1921**

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the ways in which nineteenth-century American reformers used genteel, domestic buildings to reform defiant young girls. The Connecticut Industrial School for Girls opened in 1870 as a site dedicated to both academic education and industrial training, and founders chose the family system of structures to physically represent ideas of home and love while simultaneously demonstrating authority and power. They used the campus and its built forms as teaching tools, but they also used the seemingly beneficent environment to encourage and, at times, force new identities upon girls who were in danger of becoming delinquents.

Believing girls who lived in dirty, urban conditions would become immoral and even criminal, authorities removed and relocated them into newly constructed spaces in a rural area, structures that together created a community. The site was a place for girls to grow stronger through healthy food and fresh air, education and attention.

But the school also forced assimilation. Inmates were offered only one path forward and were educated under duress. The girls were casualties of a larger cultural conflict occurring in America, a battle around issues of class and environment. Their futures were placed into the hands of people who wanted to create an American population more educated, more skilled, and seemingly, more civilized.

To understand this complex story, this study uses chapters that overlap in time but address different methodological approaches. Chapter One looks at nineteenth-century European precedents for the school, focusing on the ways in which reformers in England, France, and Germany originated the use of the family system to save children. Chapter Two locates the child-saving movement and family system in America, documenting early efforts at helping children through purpose-built structures and evolving educational ideology. Chapter Three examines the physical reality of the Connecticut Industrial School for Girls, documenting the ways in which authorities adapted the building plans to maintain control over inmates. Chapter Four explores the daily life of the inmates, adding people and their agendas to the structures. The study concludes with an examination of the family system in relation to institutional typologies in post-Civil War America.