Laundries
(Domestic Trends--Commentary--750 Words)

(With Sketch)

THE NEW AMERICAN COMMONS--

WASHING, RINSING AND SPINNING, UPSCALE AND DOWN

(EDITOR'S NOTE: With security-conscious high-rises and suburban separation, public places have become harder and harder to find. But PNS correspondent Pat Aufderheide finds one American institution that is more and more a commons--the Laundromat. Aufderheide writes on film and cultural topics for such publications as the Village Voice, In These Times, American Film and Harpers.)

By PAT AUFDERHEIDE

Pacific News Service

In the old days, you knew why you were at the Laundromat. You'd been forced there--by dirty diapers, an angry spouse or the prospect of wearing purple jeans to work.

Anything else you did there was a valiant attempt to take your mind off the drudgery, a poor rival to the hypnotic sight of your clothes going around in the dryer.

But it's not so easy to tell what brings customers into the ultramodern suburban self-service laundries these days. It
could be the video games, or the pizza or the banks of TV sets permanently beaming out rock videos.

"I'm here because the washing machine at home is broken," says Dick Friedlander, found hanging out at the suburban Maryland outlet of Soap's, a chain now franchising its way up the northeastern corridor, "but HE lives here." Dick jerks his head in the direction of his eight-year-old son, furiously intent on beating the blips on a 3-D video game.

Soap's is an ambitious meld of social settings. Its fast-food area mimics the old-time drugstore, except patrons sip sodas under signs like, "Last load must be started before 11 p.m. TRY OUR PIZZA." Its game room is modeled on video arcades, and the "living room" area has a dormitory-lounge look, complete with cuddling couples on plush sofas.

There are even little umbrellaed tables straight out of an outdoor cafe. Oh, and banks and banks of shiny new machines, under the eye of an attendant who does his best to dignify the ritual of washing your dirty linen in public.

Such a new laundry unit slides snugly into suburban settings. Adults like it "because it's clean," kids because it's one more variation on the shopping center playground. The
suburbs, despite the image of affluence, have plenty of young 
marrideds, students and working families who need coin-op 
washers.

"We're a little surprised, actually, that our business is 
78 percent family," says Soap's assistant manager, Tim Duncan. 
"We'd been oriented toward the college crowd, but I think 
we've stumbled on to something."

Laundries like this may be a growing trend—not so much to 
fill the need for a living room away from home, but because of 
economics. "These businesses need more cash flow as the price 
of real estate goes up to and beyond $10 a foot," says Andy 
Hynes, a major distributor of coin-operated equipment in 
Washington, D.C.

Now basic features of the American landscapes, 
self-service laundries first really spread after World War II 
with the rise of large-scale apartment complexes. As business 
grew, equipment manufacturers set up coin-operated divisions, 
a National Association of Coin-Operated Laundries was formed, 
and eager entrepreneurs opened up storefronts.

In the storefronts, laundry became a social institution. 
It made for jokes and boosted the sale of socks to those who 

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never managed to get home without losing at least one—but there always was something a little sordid about slinging your underwear around in public, a falling off from the ideal of the entirely self-sufficient home, mom's push-button paradise.

The laundries also tended to be purely functional, since there was little percentage in refining the operation. And since they are cash businesses—like parking lots and restaurants—many laundered money as well as clothes.

Some entrepreneurs did add on operations that matched their particular market, of course. On college campuses in North Carolina, beer sales are big moneymakers in laundry units. One Florida haven for retirees has a self-serve laundry with adjoining go-go palace. And in upscale Maryland, you can take an aerobics class while you wait for the spin-dry cycle.

But the malling of America may be redefining both the laundry business and its social life. Rent hikes have driven many operators out of business, and to buy a good property—especially to stock a place like Soap's—you need investors.

The laundry then draws its customers with a mix of attractions familiar in other corners of the mall, and the

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same people who used the plain-jane service in the past may be push-buttoned into new habits.

If you don't live in the suburbs, this social trend could be passing you by. As some laundries get glitzier, others get grimmer. The hole-in-the-wall units that survive in poor neighborhoods may be run by entire families—with mom passing out tokens while dad mans the sewing machine under the handmade sign "Tailor," and the kids sit behind the cash register staring glumly at schoolbooks.

In these neighborhoods, too, the laundry is a social center. But the video games are operated by unemployed men whose efficient dexterity brings no expression of delight. And lunch will be homemade tamales or bean pie dispensed off the same shelf as the soap flakes.

There may be no room—and no demand—for aerobics, but there is a continuous break-dancing show on the cracked pavement just outside.

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