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Browsing the Modern Kitchen—a feast of gender, place and culture (Part 1)

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ABSTRACT Assembling 10 essays from around the globe which engage variously with the space in which food preparation occurs—the kitchen—revealed stunning diversity but also commonalities. In this first of two sets of theme papers on this vital but often unexamined domestic space, the discourse of modernity unites the look and use of twentieth-century kitchens in Australia, Britain and Finland. Imbued with notions of scientific management, the modern kitchen had some common designs which prescribed women's place within it—first as the main occupant and then as the family overseer. The construction of this semi-private space also involved particular domestic technologies which, as the new century dawns, now literally connect the kitchen to the world beyond via the internet fridge. This Introduction begins the two-part feast of gender, place and culture—with an overview of Australia and sketch of subsequent essays—Supski on mid-century migrant Australia, Saarikangas on Finland, Bennett on rural Britain and Watkins on the fridge.

Introduction

One of the many contributions feminist scholars have made to the social sciences, has been to study and value domestic space. While there is a long history within archaeology, anthropology and cultural heritage of considering domestic spaces, places within houses, especially the kitchen, tend to be considered infrequently by the spatial disciplines of planning, architecture and geography (some exceptions include Greenbaum, 1981; Maglin, 1981; Murcott, 1983; Lupton 1992; Buckley 1996; Floyd, 2004; Llewellyn, 2004). In two issues of Gender, Place and Culture (13.2 and 13.6) a number of papers will examine the place set aside for, used and equipped for the preparation of food—the kitchen. Ten case studies from across time and space highlight the many ways in which gender and culture are inscribed onto, made and expressed in this most basic of domestic spaces.

The kitchen is where work mingles with desire, pleasure, creativity, violence, safety and other people; and where domestic technologies, architects and designers create devices and spaces which shape gender. In the West it is a private space which, like all others, registers public discourses as well as personal musings. Whether this space is fixed and separated within the modern home, open and communal or one which has to be reassembled daily in the streets.

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of third-world cities, the kitchen reflects and is remade by social and spatial relations.

In addition to considering the kitchen as a unique site of gender, power and culture, the papers in these Special Issues address two sub-themes, representing and extending key academic debates. The first has papers which locate the kitchen within the discourse of modernity—the modern as style and set of regulating technologies which alter prior associations between public and private, back and front, closed and notions of women in space. Just what the modern means in British, Australian and Finnish kitchens will be explored in this issue.

The second grouping of papers is more concerned with the ways in which globalisation shapes local space within the home. The movement of people as migrants or workers, the persistence of tradition, the intersection of indigenous ways with directives from development agencies and the differentiation of the globe into first- and third-world regions all impact variously on domestic work, social relations and women's cooking spaces, producing hybrid kitchens in Durban, Bolivia, Peru, Mexico, Nigeria and North America.

The rest of this introduction will explore further the notion of the modern kitchen in Western countries but particularly within Australia, and through this, highlight the perspectives and insights of the four subsequent essays.

Fixing the Space - The Kitchen in the Modern Home

The kitchen is one domestic space that has undergone significant change over the last 100 years in Western countries; in its size, location, equipment, look, social relations and value. In Australia, the kitchen was once a separate structure or a lean-to overseen by servants and wives. As Sian Supski writes for Australia, Kirsi Saarikangas charts for Finland and Helen Watkins and Katy Bennett for Britain, the kitchen is the place where modern patriarchal definitions of women were inscribed and new domestic technologies deployed over the twentieth century. They also document how the kitchen offered a space of safety, self-definition, expression and pleasure for women; as new migrants, cooks, renovators and housewives. The modern kitchen is therefore a space of containment but also empowerment. What follows is a brief history—particular to Australia but also with strong parallels in Finland and England—which foregrounds two key aspects of modernity, scientific management and the patriarchal gaze, that were spread across the Western world during the twentieth century.

The Emergence of the Western/Modern Kitchen

A specialist room in which cooking might occur was not part of early colonial life in Australia. Initially one-room tents, shacks or cottages had a continuously burning fire in the middle to supply hot water, heat and endless smoke. The middle and upper classes relied on paid domestic labour and separated the kitchen physically from the rest of the dwelling, thereby removing the hazards of smoke, fire and smells as well as the lower orders from view (Kingston, 1975). Bringing the kitchen into the dwelling was associated with technical changes—such as the enclosed stove, gas and electrical power—but was also accompanied by major social shifts in the status of women by a fall in the availability of servants, rising levels of affluence and changed household management regimes (Reiger, 1985; Webber, 2000). However, if late nineteenth-century kitchens were attached
physically to the home, they remained at the rear of the dwelling and afforded the lesser status that still attached to spaces dealing with food, dirt, women and servants (Tuan 1974; Davison, 1978).

With the rapid demise of the availability of servants and the proliferation of domestic technology in the early decades of the twentieth century, the ‘housewife’ was born in Australia. In parallel with other Western countries, her role changes across the century from household manager to scientific overseer in the 1920s, moving to become the economiser in the 1930s and 1940s, the perfect mother of the 1950s, a sexually liberated paid worker in the 1960s and 1970s and finally to the superwomen of the 1980s and 90s (Matthews, 1984). Just how kitchen designs, uses and meanings alter along the way is taken up by Kirsi Saarikangas in her paper on ‘Displays of the everyday. Relations between gender and the visibility of domestic work in the modern Finnish kitchen from the 1930s to the 1950s’ (this issue). For Saarikangas the 1930s saw the Finnish kitchen transformed into a clearly demarcated space reserved for cooking and serving. By the 1950s, the kitchen is a larger space given over to the purity, simplicity and whiteness of modern Scandinavian design. For Saarikangas the modern Finnish kitchen is a space at the centre of an open-plan dwelling which is shaped by the principles of scientific management and the interventions of professional advisers.

Two key aspects of modernity highlighted by Saarikangas and by the history of Australian kitchens will be explored further here—the place of scientific management in the home and the deployment of the gaze as a key technology in the regulation of gender and other social relations. To do so I will draw on 60 issues of The Australian Home Beautiful, from the mid-1920s through to the 1960s. My reading of this journal has been informed by two main theoretical schema the taken-for-granted but structuring habitus of Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and the notion of the gendered gaze developed by Michele Foucault (1977) and Laura Mulvey (1989, 1992; see also Kuhn, 1985; Deutsche, 1996). My argument is that domestic spaces are variously constructed by discourses and walls which in turn fix and direct the gaze of those within and beyond. As a result, the kitchen becomes an archetypal domestic habitus—embodied, discursive, sensual, mythical, historical and actual, determining and determined (see also Lloyd & Johnson, 2004). It is an approach echoed in the subsequent essays.

The Scientific Kitchen - Gendering Labour and Technology

During the 1920s, articles in The Australian Home Beautiful connected women as home-makers—the custodians of the family, interior decoration, domestic labour and taste—with the principles of scientific management and the virtues of new technologies.

The 1920s was a time in Australia when the servant all but disappeared. It was also the era when new technologies, such as the ice-box, electrically powered mixers, cleaners and stoves began to move beyond the exclusive domain of the wealthy. In addition to the mechanisation of domestic labour, scientific notions of industrial production were applied to the home. Mirroring developments in Europe and North America, the application of time and motion principles meant that every footstep to and from the fridge, stove, sink and cupboard was noted, timed and measured (Fig. 1). The use of rigorous observational analysis revealed that there were three major work centres within any kitchen plan—food storage, sink and cooking facilities. These three form a working triangle linked
Figure 1. Time and motion in the kitchen—designation of the work triangle. Source: Levene, 1978, p. 7. 
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to secondary areas—working surfaces and general storage spaces. Ideally they should be positioned about 4–6 feet apart. The total walking distance between sink, stove and food preparation/storage centres should be no more than 20 feet. Codifying this ‘work triangle’ involved an efficient pattern of movement, appliance use and labour. This in turn revolutionised kitchen design and led to a limited set of layouts and the standardisation of bench heights and widths, cupboard configuration, appliance and service location (Wheeler, 1956). From such principles there emerged the six basic layouts of the well-designed kitchen—the one-wall single-line kitchen, the parallel or galley kitchen, the U-, L- and F-shaped kitchen and the island kitchen (see Fig. 2) (Levene, 1978, pp. 7–16).

These six standard plans have proliferated not only across the globe but continue with few variations today in most Western countries. The cross-national standardisation of the kitchen is a triumph of modernity and with it the regulation of domestic spaces. In her account of the emergence of the modern Finnish kitchen, Saarikangas highlights the Scandinavian variant of this story, while Sian Supski notes in ‘It was another skin’: the kitchen as home for post-war migrant
Figure 2. Basic kitchen shapes 1–6. Source: Levene, 1978, pp. 13–16.
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women’ (this issue) how new migrants aspired to acquire one of these kitchens as part of their acculturation into modern Western Australia in the 1950s.

Within such rationally designed and organised spaces, the theory of scientific management implied that anyone could utilise it. However, all the research, time
and motion studies and resulting recommendations by various experts are
directed to women as the sole occupants of the kitchen. The ergonomics of its
planning assumes a white, average height, able-bodied Western woman (Leven,
1978; Koontz, 1994). In the discussion of various developments over the decades in
The Australian Home Beautiful, the assumption is clear that this space is for women,
regardless of the supposed rationality and universality of its planning or domestic
equipment. This was the kitchen designed for all, regardless of ethnic origin.
As Sian Supski makes clear, migrant women to Australia over the 1940s and 1950s
made and remade their kitchens—securing in the process some measure of
autonomy and sense of home-making—but they also did so within the principles
of scientific management as part of their social and cultural adaptation to their
new country.

With women entering the paid workforce during and after the Second World
War, their role clearly altered. However, the answer offered by The Australian Home
Beautiful to the double work shift was not to redistribute domestic labour, but to
redesign the space in which it occurred. Thus in October 1945, the journal suggests
that the kitchen be the efficient social centre via a small work area open to other
spaces where children can play. Thus the opening of the kitchen to other parts of
the house, the removal of its walls and their replacement by benches, buffets or
just a change in floor covering is offered as a design solution to women’s mass
entry into the paid labour force and the creation of the double burden. Domestic
space thereby registers the changing nature of the home-work relation for women.
In this move, the nature of the gaze from and to the kitchen changes dramatically.

Kitchen Plans, Location and the Gaze

In a remarkable house plan reproduced in the May 1955 Australian Home Beautiful,
there is a clear visual summation of modern house planning. The Beaumaris home
of Mr and Mrs Don Brown has the kitchen at its core, but it is designed so that
Mrs Brown is both confined to her kitchen but also occupies a space where her gaze
can supervise children across the home (Fig. 3). In case there is any doubt about the
purpose of the design—or of the role of Mrs Brown within it—this floor plan has
marked upon it the view-scapes possible from the kitchen. The kitchen thereby
assumes the mantle of Foucault’s panopticon, allowing the mother to oversee her
children, supervise their entrance and exit and play within and outside the home.
As the caption notes; ‘(F)rom her strategically placed kitchen Mrs Brown can see
the front entrance, living room and den, keep an eye on the children, their outdoor
play area, or their bedroom’ (Australian Home Beautiful, May 1955, p. 14). She, in
turn, can be seen by children, husband and others from spaces outside the kitchen.

If the open plan is initiated in the 1950s, by the 1960s it is increasingly the
standard and norm in Australia but also, as Saarikangas notes, in Finland and
across the Western world. The merging of the kitchen with other rooms begins in
earnest and discussions in The Australian Home Beautiful confirm the importance of
the women’s gaze being directed to other members of her family in the process.
They in turn can watch her work. It is a double-edged gaze, with women active
but also subject to the patriarchal gaze (for an alternative interpretation, see
Lloyd & Johnson, 2004). If this is the ideal represented in a key home journal,
it is a discourse very much aspired to and accepted by those migrating to
Australia. As Sian Supski documents, the kitchen is the site of women’s
multiple subjectivities—wife, mother, housewife and homemaker—a central
From her strategically placed kitchen Mrs. Brown can see the front entrance, living room and den, keep an eye on the children in their outdoor play area, or their bedroom.

Figure 3. The woman's gaze in the open-plan house. Source: Australian Home Beautiful, May 1955, p. 14.

...
performs ordering, symbolic and emotional work alongside cooling, preserving and organising space, time and people within and well beyond the kitchen.

**Perspectives/Traditions**

The four papers in this special edition draw from and extend a number of traditions within the spatial sciences—Watkins builds on scholarship concerned with domestic technologies (Andrews & Andrews, 1974; Cowan, 1976, 1983; Cockburn & Ormrod, 1993; Brewer, 2000); Bennett and Supski’s work can be located within the anthropology and social geography of the everyday and domestic (Tuan, 1974, 1977; Lawrence, 1979, 1982; Buttimer & Seamon, 1980; de Certeau, 1984; Le Febvre, 1991; Cieraad, 1999), while Saarinkangas tracks the ways in which public discourses make the modern home, the private and women (Coward, 1984; Matrix, 1984; Atfield & Kirkham, 1989; Roberts, 1991; Spain, 1992).

In these papers, the twentieth-century Western kitchen is considered a product of modernity and as such the outcome of discourses relating to rationality, planning, scientific management and the (uneven and never complete) separation of public from private worlds. It is these which constitute a multinational domestic habitus. What is clear from the feminist perspective brought to bear on such a history is that these worlds are also gendered, imbued with differential power dynamics which ultimately privilege men over women while also offering space in which women can act, offer resistance and remake their situations. Kitchen space is therefore patriarchal but also made actively —as the long history of feminist alternative demonstrates (Gilman, 1903/2002; Hayden, 1978a, b, 1981; Allen, 1988).

In addition, these papers are located within scholarship on identity formation, research and engagement—of post-structuralism, embodiment and performativity (Weedon, 1987; Butler, 1990, 1993; Parker & Sedgewick, 1995). The post-modern kitchen thereby becomes the centre of high technology, symbolic meanings and communications; where household members may not even prepare food and eat together but graze in and beyond the kitchen. The global–local connections of emergent hybrid kitchens is the subject of the next set of papers.

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**ABSTRACT TRANSLATION**

Hojeando la cocina moderna—un banquete de género, lugar y cultura (primera parte)

**Resumen** Reunir diez ensayos de todos lados del mundo que engranan variamente con el espacio donde se prepara la comida—la cocina—reveló no solo diversidades impresionantes sino similitudes. En esta primera de dos ediciones especiales sobre este espacio doméstico esencial aunque poco examinado, el discurso de modernidad une el aspecto y el uso de cocinas del siglo XX en Australia, Gran Bretaña y Finlandia. Imbuido con conceptos de la administración científica, la cocina moderna tuvo algunos diseños comunes que prescribieron el lugar de mujeres dentro de ella—primera como el ocupante principal y luego como capataz de la familia. La construcción de este espacio semi-privado involucró también tecnologías domésticas específicas que, a la vez que amanece el nuevo siglo, actualmente enlanzan literalmente la cocina con el mundo externo vía la nevera ‘internet’. Esta introducción empieza el banquete de dos partes de género, lugar y cultura—con un repaso de Australia y un bosquejo de los ensayos subsecuentes: Supski en Australia migratorio a medio siglo, Saarikangas en Finlandia, Bennett en Británica rural, y Watkins en la nevera.