



This is a repository copy of *Extending the contested spaces of the modern kitchen*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/95613/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Meah, A.M. (2016) Extending the contested spaces of the modern kitchen. *Geography Compass*, 10 (2). pp. 41-55. ISSN 1749-8198

<https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12252>

---

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Meah, A. (2016) Extending the Contested Spaces of the Modern Kitchen. *Geography Compass*, 10: 41–55., which has been published in final form at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12252>. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving (<http://olabout.wiley.com/WileyCDA/Section/id-820227.html>).

**Reuse**

Unless indicated otherwise, fulltext items are protected by copyright with all rights reserved. The copyright exception in section 29 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 allows the making of a single copy solely for the purpose of non-commercial research or private study within the limits of fair dealing. The publisher or other rights-holder may allow further reproduction and re-use of this version - refer to the White Rose Research Online record for this item. Where records identify the publisher as the copyright holder, users can verify any specific terms of use on the publisher's website.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

This is an Author Accepted Manuscript of an article published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd. in  
GEOGRAPHY COMPASS

To cite this article: Meah, A. 2016. Extending the contested spaces of the modern kitchen.  
Geography Compass, 10/2: 41–55

## **Extending the contested spaces of the modern kitchen**

**Dr. Angela Meah**

Department of Geography  
University of Sheffield  
Sheffield, UK  
S10 2TU

[a.meah@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:a.meah@sheffield.ac.uk)

## **Extending the contested spaces of the modern kitchen**

### **Abstract**

This essay seeks to broaden understandings of the domestic kitchen in the global North which consign its significance to the preparation or cooking of food, an activity assumed to be undertaken chiefly by women. Here, I take a social practice perspective, examining 'the kitchen' not as a monolithic physical 'site' (in the spatial sense) occupied primarily by women users, but as one where a range of practices cohere, reflecting multiple meanings and uses among those individuals who inhabit them. Exploring how the domestic kitchen has – over the last century – been conceptualised as a barometer of ideological dialectics, as an orchestrating concept and as the symbolic heart of the home, I reveal how this most humble of domestic spaces is both material and symbolic, figurative and substantive, rendering it a serious – but often neglected - object of academic inquiry.

### **Keywords**

kitchen; social practices; ideology; design history; materialities

## Extending the contested spaces of the modern kitchen

### Introduction

**kitchen:** [noun] a room or area where food is prepared or cooked (Oxford Dictionaries 2015)

Consult pretty much any dictionary and it will provide a similar definition for '*kitchen*' which focuses exclusively on the preparation or cooking of food. As such, in modern kitchens in the global North, one might expect to find certain key items, such as a cooker of some description, cold storage and a sink. In many, it is not uncommon now also to find dishwashers and laundry appliances, as well as seating areas equipped for dining. This essay seeks to broaden that definition by emphasising that, from a social practice standpoint, the kitchen soon emerges as a space in which many activities and practices - which go well beyond food preparation - may occur.

Historically, the kitchen was a space most commonly occupied by working class women - either in their own kitchens or in those where they were employed as cooks and maids (Meah 2014) – who were relegated to the rear of the house beyond public view where they were engaged in the 'sanitary labour' (Saarikangas, 2006) which comprised kitchen work. Even after the 'servant problem' had redefined the role of the middle class housewife, seeing her transformed – across the Twentieth Century - from household manager to household worker<sup>1</sup>, thence to 'ideal housewife and perfect mother' and, more recently, as the 'superwoman' who can have it all (Conran 1975), the kitchen has remained a

contested domain, a site of gendered labour, dually imagined - on the one hand - as a site of domestic oppression for women – or on the other - as the ‘symbolic heart of the home’ (Hand et al. 2007). Such conceptualisations might lead to this particular domestic space being regarded as ineligible for serious academic scholarship outside either feminist studies or food studies. Indeed, a dismissive or careless reader might relegate the significance of the kitchen to feminist debates belonging to another era, when women were perceived – by second wave feminists – to be ‘captive wives’ and ‘housebound mothers’ (Gavron 1966). But the kitchen is so much more than a site of ‘domestic captivity’ and, in this paper, I explore how this once marginal domestic space has moved centre-stage and emerged as an object of scholarship across a range of disciplines over the last century, geographers being at the vanguard in reconstituting understandings of the relationship between domestic space and place and the social practices these make possible, and for whom. Importantly, in doing so, I seek to extend the conceptual boundaries of the kitchen beyond either foodwork – a central activity therein – or the alleged oppression of women in undertaking such work<sup>2</sup>. My aim is to highlight the ways in which the kitchen has emerged as a site of social and cultural significance both within academia, and beyond, leading to its conceptualisation – variously - as a barometer of ideological dialectics, as an orchestrating concept, and as the symbolic heart of the home wherein ‘kitchen life’ (Wills et al 2013) (an understanding of what transpires within the kitchen which extends beyond foodwork) unfolds. At the heart of this analysis is the emergence of the kitchen as a site, primarily, of consumption, rather than (or as well as) production (cf. Cox 2013).

Between 2010-11, the evolution of the modern kitchen was the subject of an exhibition – *‘Counter Space: Design and the Modern Kitchen’* – curated by the Museum of

Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. Focussing, in particular, on designs emerging during the inter- and post-World War periods, the exhibition highlights the extent to which transformations of the kitchen can be viewed as ‘a barometer of changing technologies, aesthetics, and ideologies’ (MoMA 2014, *design + the modern kitchen*). Reviewing the exhibition, Jennifer Scanlan (2011) reports how it was curated to illuminate the kitchen as both an object of design and as a nexus of cultural meaning, subjects which have elicited considerable interest among scholars approaching the kitchen from a range of disciplinary perspectives. Thematically, the exhibition was organised around three key concepts - the model of the ‘effective’ modern kitchen, the emergence of consumerism, and the representation of lived experiences of the kitchen in popular culture and art - each of which can be loosely mapped onto the extended understanding of ‘the kitchen’ which I aim to engender in this review. Some are inescapably connected to the relationship between women and domestic work, but this is not my focus here<sup>3</sup>. Instead, I begin with a concern with highlighting the design efforts made to address ‘the problem’ of women’s unpaid domestic labour in the home. I examine how these can be mapped on to (and were shaped by) broader social and ideological concerns during particular historical periods, transforming women from ‘workers’ into ‘consumers’. Here, I explore the kitchen as a site of consumption, appropriation and a vehicle for the expression of class, gender and cultural identities. Following the theme of consumption, I then look at how – via processes of ‘regime change’ (Hand and Shove 2004) over the last 100 years – the kitchen has been reconstituted as an orchestrating concept, a site in which numerous practices cohere, giving it material and symbolic potential. Finally, reflecting its recent incarnation as a hub of domestic life, I expand our understanding of the ways in which the kitchen has been reconstituted as a space for living, illustrating how its meanings and uses for their occupants

extend beyond 'work', food-related or otherwise. Here, I draw attention to ethnographic work which has emphasized the 'more-ness' of the kitchen in contributing to processes of identification, as well as actively curating the lives of their occupants.

### **The kitchen as...**

#### *An ideological battleground*

In this first section, I explore the emergence of the 'modern' kitchen and how this was shaped – initially - by aspirations for more efficient means of working for housewives. I document how – in imagining women as 'workers' – the kitchen was enrolled as a site of ideological dialectics by planners of mass housing projects in the Inter-War period. However, rather than being passive consumers, working class occupants – in particular - appropriated standardised kitchen spaces to reflect their own ideas of good taste, respectability and efficient practice, thereby subverting the visions prescribed by so-called housing 'experts'.

That the kitchen has been regarded – by some - as a 'laboratory' (Lloyd and Johnson 2004; Van Caudenberg and Heynen 2004) or 'machine for the preparation of meals' (Llewellyn 2004a, p. 234) is reflected in the emphasis placed by Modernist architects and designers on functionalism, operational efficiency and the principles of household management. Although these ideas originate in the work of American journalist, Christine Fredericks who, equipped with evidence from time-and-motion experiments, called for the professionalization of housework in her 1919 publication, *Household Engineering: scientific management in the home* (Jerram 2006, p. 543)<sup>4</sup>, their roots can be traced back to an earlier

period. Indeed, as early as the 1860s, middle-class American feminist Catherine Beecher complained of the drudgery of housework and the lot of a 'housewife in an ill-planned kitchen' (Jerram 2006, p. 543). The outcome of this, writes historian Leif Jerram (2006), was the 'workshop-kitchen'; the first conception of the domestic fitted kitchen.

The impact of management discourses in influencing the ideas of design professionals in the global North during the first half of the Twentieth Century has been examined by a number of scholars<sup>5</sup> and, regardless of their ideological position, advocates of each of the variants of the modern kitchen (also described as the 'New Kitchen') purportedly 'shared an admiration for scientific reason and utopian aspirations for a more egalitarian society. By transforming daily life at the level of the kitchen, it was argued, behavioral change and improved social well-being would follow' (MoMA 2014, *the new kitchen*). Examples of this scientific approach to the consumption and organization of space have been reported by geographer Louise Johnson (2006), who details the application of time-and-motion principles in Australia, Europe and North America which led, in the 1920s, to the identification of a 'working triangle' – the sink, food storage and cooking areas<sup>6</sup>. Meanwhile, art historian Kirsi Saarikangas (2006) provides evidence from Finland where - reinforced by the international doctrine of Taylorism which sought to rationalise factory production along scientific lines to maximise production<sup>7</sup> - Functionalist architects of the 1930s saw that the repetitive and monotonous model of factory work performed alone on the assembly line was applied in designing the modern kitchen. With superfluous movements reduced, household work could be performed standing in one place (Saarikangas 2006, p. 164).



Likewise, in Britain during the 1940s, Mark Llewellyn (2004b, p. 53) reports that among the designs of architect Jane Drew, that of the *package kitchen* – based on standardised and mass-produced units<sup>8</sup> - in particular, ‘implied an efficient worker-housewife’. He argues that the rational, ordered efficiency of this domestic work-space embodied primarily masculine values. Consequently, the routinized nature of the housewife’s tasks, performed with calm efficiency, meant that women’s ‘role in the kitchen was paralleled with that of the factory worker.’

Jerram documents that, in Germany, two competing spatial models were employed in mass housing projects during the 1920s. The first can be seen via the ‘Frankfurt kitchen’ (see Figure 1), an example of which was displayed as part of the MoMA exhibition in 2011, while the second was developed in Munich (see Figure 2).



Figure 1. The Frankfurt Kitchen 1926, designed to reduce women's labour in the home<sup>9</sup>

Both experiments were premised upon 'applying a certain sort of knowledge about space, which would in turn create rational and orderly subjects to inhabit it' (Jerram 2006, p. 538). Essentially, this involved '*enforc*[ing housing planners'] visions through the use of space' (Jerram 2006, p. 539 [original emphasis]). The two models differed, crucially, in the way that the space was conceptualised. In Frankfurt, the architects of this project, Ernst May and Grete Schütte-Lihotzky, chose to abandon the traditional German working-class practice of combining the social space of the family with the 'workplace' of the woman in a single *wohnküche* ('living room-cum-kitchen') (Jerram 2006, p. 541). The 'expert knowledge' upon

which the design was based can, somewhat ironically, be called into question when we consider the fact that the designer, Schütte-Lihotzky, later admitted:

*“The truth of the matter was, I’d never run a household before designing the Frankfurt Kitchen, I’d never cooked, and had no idea about cooking” (MoMA 2014, the Frankfurt kitchen).*

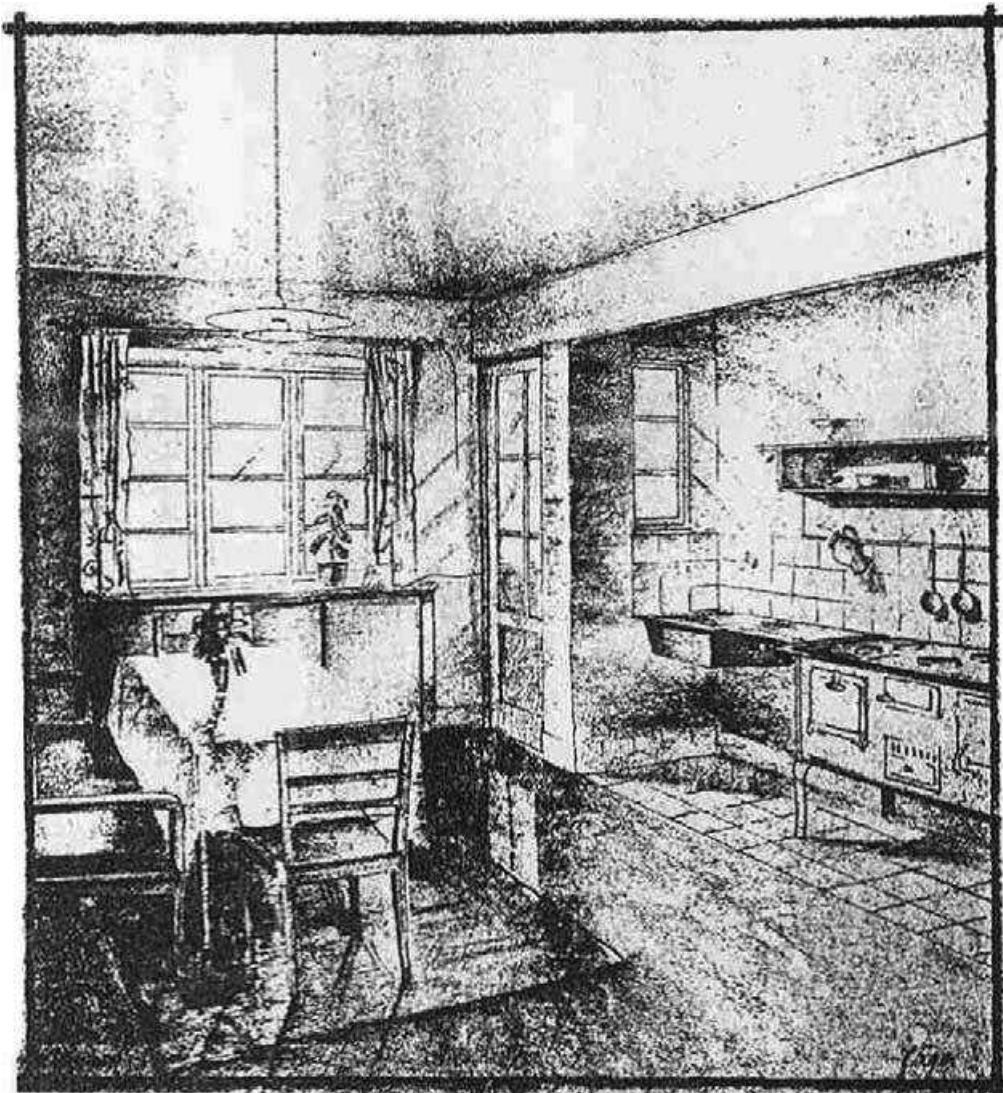


Figure 2. The Munich Kitchen, uniting women’s work and social spaces<sup>10</sup>

Motivated by the ideals of efficiency and productivity they believed to have been purported in Frederick's *Household Engineering*, May and Schütte-Lihotzky imagined producing more productive workers by separating their work and leisure spaces. However, Jerram notes the further irony that the planners' understanding of Frederick's work was fundamentally faulty: rather than imagining the woman 'worker' that she refers to in *Household Engineering* as a *producer*, Frederick was – in fact – investing in the role of housewife as *consumer* (Jerram 2006, p. 546-47).

By way of contrast - in Munich - the idea that women were 'instruments' of production was rejected by the city government. Here, working-class women were ascribed greater agency in their capacity to organise and manage their domestic space (albeit within the parameters set by the city government). Interestingly, when Munich officials managed to speak with some of the women occupants of the Frankfurt houses, among their principal criticisms was that they could not talk with their families or friends while in the kitchen; like the factory worker, they were isolated. Additionally, they also complained of being unable to personalise the space by utilising their own furniture (Jerram 2006, p. 448-549).

Far from being a private, domestic domain, occupied by women and relegated to the rear of the house, beyond view and lacking in importance, during the early part of the Twentieth Century, we see how the kitchen underwent a transformation in its social significance via attempts to enrol women users within key ideological dialectics of the period, be they the workers imagined within Marxian, materialist discourses or the consumers central to the capitalist economy. However, as I shall illustrate in what follows, attempts at state intervention into the organisation of domestic life was not a phenomenon specific to Germany, nor was it met without resistance by kitchen users.

*A site of (class) resistance*

Paralleling the experience with mass housing projects in Frankfurt, Llewellyn (2004a, p. 240) argues that in designing Kensal House, Britain's first housing estate inspired by Modern architecture, the ideals of architect, E. Maxwell Fry, and housing consultant, Elizabeth Denby, tended to completely overlook working-class social practice. Indeed, ignoring both the fact that existing practice was to keep the living room 'for best' (cf. Attfield 1995), and also a preference for a kitchen-living room arrangement – expressed, for example, by women questioned during the Mass Observation studies of the 1930s and 1940s (Llewellyn 2004a, p. 234) - the flats at Kensal House were designed to enable families to eat their meals away from the food preparation area, facilitating a separation of “the important work of the house” which could continue “without disturbing the life of the living-room” (Fry 1938, cited in Llewellyn 2004a, p. 233). However, as Llewellyn observes, these plans for the organisation of domestic space envisaged by Modernist experts did not align with residents' experiences (or requirements) of domestic life. A conflict thus ensued as a result of the production and consumption of this space, since 'the uses to which it was being put were not necessarily those for which the space was intended' (2004a. p. 40). For example, Llewellyn notes that almost a third reported eating in a kitchen not built for this purpose, either perched up at the ironing board, or at the serving hatch (ibid). Importantly, by the 1940s, the living room-kitchen arrangement was included as a recommendation made to, and subsequently published by, the government's Central Housing Advisory Committee (Llewellyn 2004b: 54). During this period, the designs of architects, such as Jane Drew for example, envisaged more modular and open-plan living spaces, perhaps divided only by a

low partition wall, which simultaneously had the effect of allowing spaces to merge into each other, while also reducing women's isolation in the kitchen (ibid) (see figure 3).

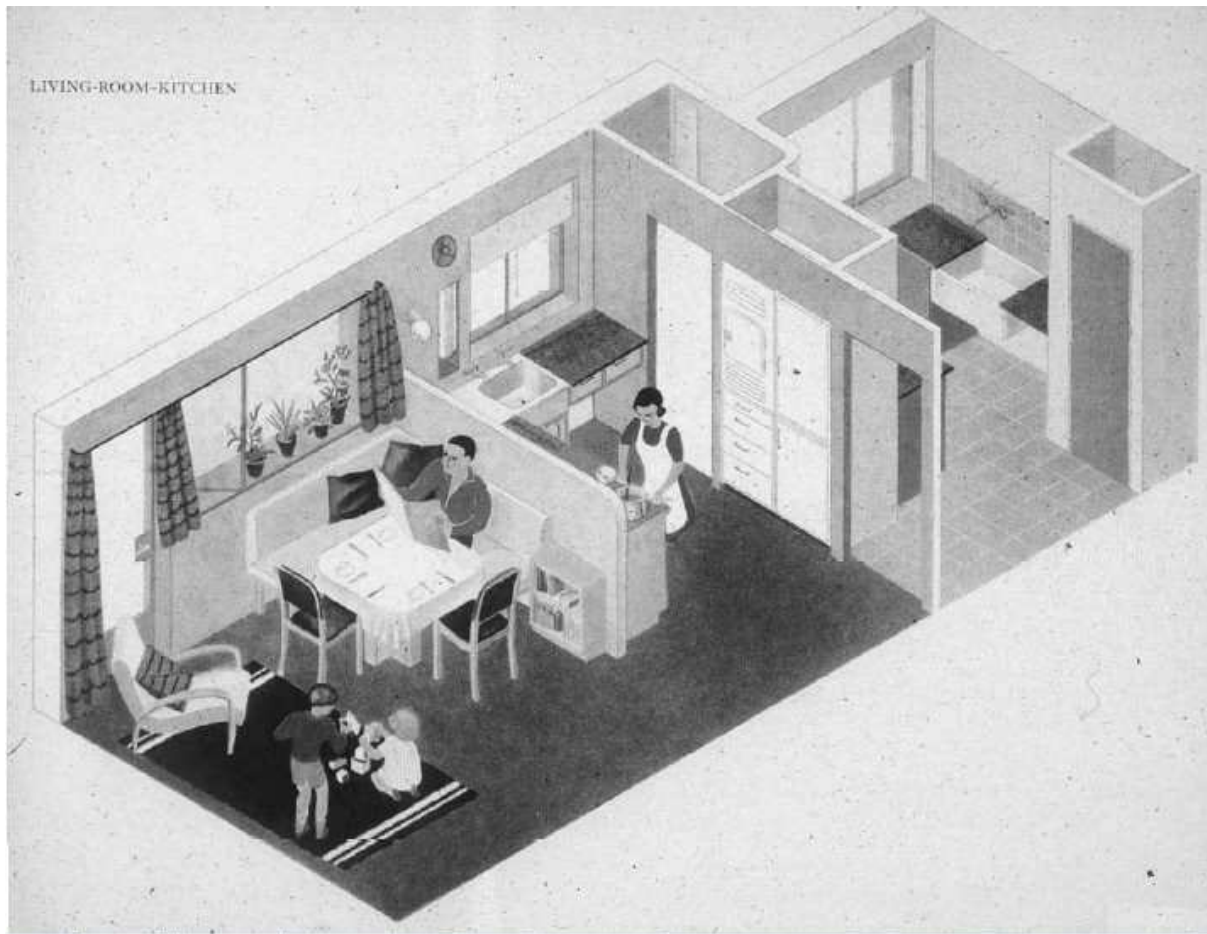


Figure 3. Jane Drew's 'living-kitchen', 1944<sup>11</sup>

The experience of the Kensal House experiment was echoed elsewhere in Europe. For example, Van Caudenberg and Heynen (2004) acknowledge that while the quest for a rational kitchen was applauded by bourgeois and middle-class women, its reception among their rural and working-class counterparts was far more tepid, if the message actually reached them at all. Part of a wider social plan to produce a stable society via the training of orderly subjects with proper ways of living, the fascination with the standardised, rational kitchen was not shared across all social groupings. Indeed, limited space and financial resources and ideologies concerning the family unit, dictated a preference for a

'living-kitchen' arrangement among rural and working-class households alike. However, ultimately, the rational kitchen - which facilitated a separation of kitchen 'work' and the social practice of eating (which was to take place in another room) - failed to be accepted among these social groups for reasons of privacy and propriety. As with the occupants of Kensal House reported by Llewellyn (2004a), there was a similar preference for reserving one room as the 'best place'. Here, valued possessions and furniture were displayed and it could be kept tidy and undisturbed by wider domestic life and activity – including eating – and ready to host important visitors, such as the priest or doctor (Van Caudenberg and Heynen 2004, p. 41).

Llewellyn's account of the Kensal House residents who subverted the use of kitchen spaces imagined by those who designed them is not an isolated example in Britain. A number of scholars provide evidence that residents of modern housing developments were not the passive 'housewife-consumers' (Hollows 2000, p. 125)<sup>12</sup> that either Christine Frederick had imagined, or that advertisers manipulating the relations between class, gender and space (Miller 1991, p. 264) hoped for. Indeed, among those women who, by the 1950s, were engaged in paid employment outside the home, there was no desire to return home from one machine environment to another in their kitchens (Partington 1995). Additionally, Angela Partington (1995) observes, there remained a persistence of a 'make-do-and mend' mentality in the aftermath of the Second World War (cf. Attfield 1995) which undermined the imperative for harmonious interiors imagined by designers.

There are numerous examples – across a global context – of women defying the aesthetic desired by designers wishing to educate them in the principles of 'good taste', asserting – instead – their own class and gender-based preferences (Hollows 2000, p. 127).

For example, Judy Attfield (1995, p. 228) reports that in the front-facing kitchens of Harlow 'New Town' in the 1950s, women put up net curtains and actively 'took control of their own domestic space and at the same time made a public declaration of their variance from the architects' design'. Likewise, Daniel Miller (1988), reporting findings from his work in North London, illustrates the ways in which council estate tenants transformed, personalised and, essentially, 'appropriated', standardised kitchen spaces<sup>13 14</sup>. Similar evidence has also been provided by Susie Reid (2002) regarding the 'de-Stalinization' of consumer taste in the Soviet Union during the Khrushchev era.

Practices of resistance have also been reported among migrant women seeking to exert their identities in a dominant culture. For example, Sian Supski (2006, p. 138) discusses the experiences of migrant women in post-colonial Australia who rejected the dominant architectural discourses of the time, setting about extensively renovating their dwellings, and kitchens in particular, with a view to creating a sense of 'home' in places which otherwise would be unhomely. Not only did these women create their 'own competing discourses of efficiency' which defied those of planning 'experts,' but they also used colour and decoration to personalise and appropriate the kitchen as a particularly *feminised* space, which clearly contrasts with the masculinist ideals of the rational workshop kitchens during the early part of the last century. And, not unlike earlier generations of working class English and Belgian families, Lara Pascali (2006) reports the practice – among first generation Italian immigrants to North America – of keeping two kitchens: one upstairs, a showroom for guests, the other in the basement, where foodwork and the real business of family life were organised and celebrated.



Having outlined the ways in which competing ideological positions have been reflected in the design history of the modern kitchen, via which women were transformed from mere 'producers' to 'consumers', I now focus more closely on the kitchen as a site of consumption, examining it not just as a physical site, but as an orchestrating concept through which a range of practices and possibilities come together.

### **Consuming kitchens**

While some scholars have approached the kitchen from ideological perspectives via which social class and gender are foregrounded, others have explored it through the lens of 'practice', enabling us to understand the kitchen as more than a site of foodwork or the production of gender or class-based ideologies. Here, the work of Martin Hand and Elizabeth Shove (2004) has been particularly insightful.

Bringing together discussions of material culture, design and the dynamics of practice, these authors examine the kitchen via processes of 'regime change' reflected in issues of *Ideal Home* and *Good Housekeeping* published in Britain in 1922, 1952 and 2002. As previously suggested, this period witnessed a series of conceptual shifts through which the kitchen evolved from a functional backstage space in which the business of kitchen-work took place, to one which - by the 1950s - had been depopulated by humans and resembled 'a machine made of functionally synchronised, smoothly interconnecting, aesthetically coherent parts' (2004, p. 245). This was precisely the type of kitchen presented by US Vice President Richard Nixon to Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev during the opening of the American National Exhibition at Sokolniki Park in Moscow in July 1959. Stood before the

showcase kitchen, Nixon argued that this was a symbol of the comfort and luxury available to the common American (see figure 4) (Scanlan 2011, p. 343)<sup>15</sup>. Scanlan (2011, p. 342) argues that – over half a century later - the MoMA exhibition display, *visions of plenty*, charts the shift from ‘ideas to aesthetics, as the role of design changed from creating an ideal world to creating a consumer culture’<sup>16</sup>.



Figure 4. Khrushchev and Nixon and the showcase kitchen at Sokolniki Park<sup>17</sup>

If the 1950s kitchen is depicted as an aesthetically attractive and automated entity, Hand and Shove note that by the turn of this century, ‘the kitchen had been ‘repopulated and redefined as a space for living and leisure’ (2004, p. 246). Their work is of particular interest since they analyse the kitchen as neither an innovation junction<sup>18</sup> – which undoubtedly it is – or as a site in which generic transformations in work, leisure and the gendered roles of men and women are given expression<sup>19</sup> but, rather, they ‘consider the transformation of “the kitchen” not as a place but as an orchestrating concept’ (Hand and

Shove 2004, p. 238). Indeed, building on scholarship which points toward the kitchen as an emergent outcome of multiple interactions, Hand and Shove present a theoretical account of the *processes* involved in transformation, via which they develop ‘ways of explaining how and why particular regimes or *combinations* of technologies, images, meanings and forms of skill stabilize, become dominant, and fall into decline’(ibid.).

While the literature previously discussed points toward emerging kitchen regimes as being an outcome of other factors – including class and political ideologies – Hand and Shove (ibid, p.239) consider what it would be like to conceptualize ‘the kitchen’ as a kind of ‘force field’ that repels and holds particular sets of images, materials, and forms of competence together, and that is sustained by them. They cite Catherine Beecher’s vision of the workshop-kitchen as ‘a fine example of “the kitchen” as a meta-level concept in terms of which elements are (or can be) arranged and ordered to produce certain outcomes’ (ibid. p. 239). Following an examination of the relevant issues of *Good Housekeeping* and *Ideal Home* during periods when the kitchen was conceptualised first as a site of household engineering, then as one of automation, and – more recently – as a convenient living space, Hand and Shove (2004, p. 247) consider how these ‘regimes’ change, suggesting a number of possibilities. One is that ‘the ingredients (i.e. material arrangements, meanings and images, competence and knowhow) of which they are made have trajectories of their own’. Another possibility is that ‘they develop as a result of continual interaction and mutual adjustment between constituent elements’. In addition, they suggest, ‘orchestrating concepts like “the kitchen” may have a life of their own, structuring whilst also being structured by the elements they hold together’. In this sense, then, we may understand ‘the kitchen’ as not

just a physical 'site' (in the spatial sense), but also a 'site' where numerous practices cohere, rendering it, at once, as both material and symbolic, figurative and substantive.

Independent of the type of regime changes outlined here, these ideas concerning the relationships between material culture, kitchen consumption and the dynamics of practice are particularly relevant when we consider that - in the UK - kitchens are replaced – on average - every seven years or so (Shove et al. 2007), making this space a particularly important site of consumption, renovation and renewal. However, since the kitchen has evolved – in the new Millennium – as a space for living, rather than work, along with the reconstitution – among certain constituencies - of cooking as a leisure activity (and a de- or re-gendered one at that)<sup>20</sup>, material artefacts are consumed for a variety of reasons which extend beyond the elimination of 'labour'. For example, Shove et al. (2007) suggest that as well as being signifiers of identity (as with the working-class occupants of Harlow New Town, or migrant women in Australia and North America), material items – including particular aesthetics, as well as the technologies of the kitchen – are not passive, but interact with people thus affording them agency in actively configuring their users (Shove et al. 2007, p. 23). While some items might, for example, enable their users to achieve 'better' or faster results in terms of cooking and cleaning (Cf. Meah and Jackson 2013; Meah, In press), evidence from Hand and colleagues' (2007) study of kitchens (and bathrooms) indicates that material items are also implicated in the performance - or doing - of 'family', which is particularly significant within the current conceptualisation of kitchen as a space for living, an idea embraced in a kitchen manufacturer's advertisement published in *Good Housekeeping* in 2002, where the kitchen is described as "*somewhere you want to spend*

*time, where you feel comfortable, where you can simply live your life”* (Hand et al. 2007, p. 675).

Clearly, the kitchen has evolved in social and cultural significance since designers and housing planners first imagined how they might liberate women from the drudgery of kitchen work. While the elements which constitute ‘the kitchen’ can be arranged to produce particular outcomes, or specific items acquired to facilitate more effective or competent performances by their users, approaching ‘the kitchen’ as an orchestrating concept both figuratively and substantively render it as active in the constitution and performance of everyday life. Consequently, it is with this idea of the kitchen having been transformed from a *space* for foodwork into a *place* for living that I now conclude this alternate perspective.

### **Expanding the meaning of ‘kitchen life’**

The final section of the MoMA exhibition – *kitchen sink dramas* – attends to post-1960s representations (within popular culture and art) of lived experiences in this hub of domestic activity<sup>21</sup>. Perhaps not surprisingly, these coincide with second wave feminism and the feelings of alienation experienced by working-class women in particular. Just as the exhibition reflects a narrowing in focus from the general to the specific – from broader social and ideological concerns to the lived reality of individuals – so, too, does my analysis converge upon what occurs at the household level, also focusing on social practices as well as media representations.

In the UK, there have been a number of recent ethnographic studies which have highlighted the *more-ness* of what transpires in individual kitchens which extends beyond

either the preparation or consumption of food. An important contributor to this more nuanced understanding of 'kitchen life' is the work of Wendy Wills and colleagues (2013), which reports research specifically commissioned by UK Food Standards Agency to explore the ways in which what transpires within the kitchen might be implicated in the incidence of foodborne disease. The authors reveal that among the 20 participating households, the kitchen was a place in which relationships were played out between siblings, partners and members of different generations (cf. Bennett 2006); where pets slept and were cared for; and a whole range of non-food activities took place, from reading the paper to bicycle maintenance, none of which appear to have previously been considered in the development of food safety policy and guidance.

Findings from the study also reveal that the kitchen was a place in which particular consumption activities converge, from the exhibiting of collections of post-cards and other ephemera on fridges (cf. Watkins 2006) to the display of photographs by older people to engender a feeling of homeliness following bereavement and a move into social housing (Meah et al. 2013). Others have additionally emphasized the role of the kitchen in processes of identification and the maintenance of ethnic and cultural identities, particularly among migrant communities (Pascali 2006; Supski 2006; Longhurst et al. 2009).

While the relationship between food and memory - mobilized through the senses - has become a common trope in contemporary food studies (Jackson 2013)<sup>22</sup>, Peter Jackson and I (in press) have focussed on the kitchen itself, attempting to conceptualise it as a *lieu de mémoire* – a site of memory - within the wider domain of home, which itself may be regarded as a kind of private museum; a space in which objects of personal, artistic, or cultural interest are stored and displayed to narrate the untold stories of lives being lived

(Gregson et al. 2007; Llewellyn 2004b), those having been lived, and those which are imagined (now and into the future) within them. Among our findings – taken from more than one multi-method ethnographic study – we report how some of our participants remembered the past via the careful curation, within their kitchens, of material objects, including collectable silverware and wedding china. While displaying objects, images and other items which document an individual's or family's history is not a practice that is confined to the kitchen, there is a particular informality about the mode of display here compared with those which may take place in other rooms of the house, where photographs – for example - tend to have a more formal character, are framed and grouped to recreate a sense of 'togetherness' (see Percival 2002; Rose 2003). In contrast, the kitchen is more likely to be home to collages of moments or snapshots in time pinned to a notice board, Blu-tacked to a wall or decorating fridges, freezers and boilers: fun passport photographs, digital images printed on copier paper, party invitations, ticket stubs, favourite quotes, children's self-portraits, their handprints, post-cards, fridge-magnet-souvenirs – either bought or gifted. What might – initially appear to be ephemera can actually be a rich material archive which testify to an individual's or a family history and identity (see Figure 5).

Other participants incorporated objects which had their own histories, which might be linked to deceased individuals, into their everyday practices, thereby enabling the past and present (and possible future) to cohabit via a process of poly-temporality (Sutton 2011). A jug which had previously belonged to a now-deceased grandmother, for example, remained in daily use, assuming the status of an 'evocative object' (Pollack 2011). Items such as these facilitate connections with moments in time and particular individuals from

the past while simultaneously creating the possibility of prospective memory (Meah and Jackson, in press). From wedding china to children's drawings, a jug to a fridge magnet, individuals' consumption, appropriation, use and display of material artefacts demonstrate the portability of memory, which may be transferred from one kitchen to another, thereby facilitating the transformation of a space into a place.



Figure 5. A kitchen-museum<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

Meal machine, experimental laboratory, status symbol, domestic prison, or the creative and spiritual heart of the home? Over the course of the past century no other room has been the focus of such intensive aesthetic and technological innovation, or as loaded with cultural significance (MoMA 2014, *design + the modern kitchen*).



Although by no means comprehensive in coverage, this review has endeavoured to persuade the unfamiliar reader that the kitchen holds promise which goes beyond its conceptualisation as either a site of domestic oppression for women, or one which is relevant only insofar as one is interested in matters concerning food. The above quote, taken from the homepage of the MoMA exhibition, conveniently encapsulates the extent to which the kitchen has become loaded with social and cultural significance over the last century or so. Bringing together literature from a range of disciplines, I have attempted to foreground how, in examining the history of the modern kitchen, we see how it can be understood as a barometer of the great social changes which have transpired in parallel with its spatial evolution. More than this, the separation between public and private has been elided by the enrolment of the kitchen, via imagined women users, within the ideological dialectics of the Modernist period. Whether the motivations of housing planners, architects and designers fell on the side of viewing women as producers or consumers, the responses among those for whom these spaces of *foodwork* was intended clearly reveals them to be far from passive consumers. Indeed, via the hanging of net-curtains, the use of pastel shades, the exhibition of photographs and postcards, and the curation of material artefacts of some personal significance, individuals resist – as I do here – the narrow conceptualisation of what has, until relatively recently, been assumed to transpire within the kitchen and which has, consequently, entrenched its position as unworthy of serious academic scholarship. The examination I have presented is intended to challenge those who might be similarly dismissive to re-evaluate, extend their imagination and look at the kitchen in a way that they may not have thought possible before.

## References

- AARSETH, H. 2009. From Modernized Masculinity to Degendered Lifestyle Projects: Changes in Men's Narratives on Domestic Participation 1990—2005. *Men and Masculinities*, 11, 424-440.
- ATTFIELD, J. 1995. Inside Pram Town: a case study of Harlow house interiors, 1951-61, in Attfield, J. and Kirkham, P. (eds), *A View from the Interior: women and design*. London: Women's Press, pp.215-38.
- BENNETT, K. 2006. Kitchen Drama: Performances, patriarchy and power dynamics in a Dorset farmhouse kitchen. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 13, 153-160.
- BROWNLIE, D. & HEWER, P.A. 2007. Prime beef cuts: culinary images for thinking 'men'. *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, 10(3), 229-250.
- CAIRNS, K., JOHNSTON, J. & BAUMANN, S. 2010. Caring about food: doing gender in the foodie kitchen. *Gender and Society*, 24, 591.
- CIERAAD, I. 2002. 'Out of my kitchen!' Architecture, gender and domestic efficiency. *The Journal of Architecture*, 7, 263-279.
- CHAPMAN, T. & HOCKEY, J. (eds). 1999. *Ideal Homes? Social Change and Domestic Life*. London, Routledge.
- COCKBURN, C. & FÜRST-DILIC, R. 1994. *Bringing Technology Home: Gender and Technology in Changing Europe*. Buckingham, OpenUniversity Press.
- COCKBURN, C. & ORMROD, J. 2000. *Gender and Technology in the Making*. London, Sage.
- CONRAN, S. 1975. *Superwoman*. London: Sidgwick and Jackson.
- COWAN, R. S. 1998. The 'Industrial Revolution' in the Home: Household Technology and Social Change in the Twentieth Century. In Hopkins, P. (ed.) *Sex/Machine: Readings in Culture, Gender and Technology*. Indianapolis, IN, Indiana University Press.

- COX, R. 2013. House/Work: Home as a Space of Work and Consumption, *Geography Compass*, 7(12), 821–831.
- DOORLY, M. 1999. *A Woman's Place: Dolores Hayden on the Grand Domestic Revolution*. In MacKenzie, D. and Wajcman J. (eds). *The Social Shaping of Technology*, pp. 314–17. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- EHRENREICH, B. & ENGLISH, D. 1979. *For Her Own Good: 150 Yearsof the Experts' Advice to Women*. London, Pluto Press.
- FREEMAN, J. 2004. *The Making of the Modern Kitchen*, Oxford, Berg.
- GAVRON, H. 1966. *The Captive Wife*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- GREGSON, N., METCALFE, A. & CREWE, L. 2007. Identity, mobility, and the throwaway society. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 25, 682-700.
- HAND, M. & SHOVE, E. 2004. Orchestrating Concepts: Kitchen Dynamics and Regime Change in *Good Housekeeping and Ideal Home*. *Home Cultures*, 1, 235-256.
- HAND, M., SHOVE, E. & SOUTHERTON, D. 2007. Home extensions in the United Kingdom: space, time, and practice. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 25, 668-681.
- HOLDEN, T. J. M. 2005. The overcooked and the underdone: masculinities in Japanese food programming. *Food and foodways*, 13, 39-65.
- HOLLOWS, J. 2000 *Feminism and Femininity and Popular Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- HOLLOWS, J. 2003. Oliver's Twist: Leisure, Labour and Domestic Masculinity in The Naked Chef. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6, 229-248.
- HOLTSMAN, J. D. 2006. Food and Memory. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 35, 361-378.
- ISENSTADT, S. 1998. Visions of plenty: refrigerators in America around 1950. *Journal of Design History*, 11(4), 311-421.
- JACKSON, P. 2013. Memory, in P. Jackson and the CONANX Group, *Food Words: essays in culinary culture* (pp. 137-139). London, Bloomsbury.

- JERRAM, L. 2006. Kitchen sink dramas: women, modernity and space in Weimar Germany. *Cultural Geographies*, 13, 538-556.
- JOHNSON, L. C. 2006. Browsing the Modern Kitchen—a feast of gender, place and culture (Part 1). *Gender, Place & Culture*, 13, 123-132.
- KITCHEN STORIES (Salmer fra Kjøkkenet). 2003. Directed by Bent Hamer. Norway/Sweden, BOB Film Sweden AB, Bulbul Films, Svenska Filminstitutet (SFI).
- LLEWELLYN, M. 2004a. 'Urban village' or 'white house': envisioned spaces, experienced places, and everyday life at Kensal House, London in the 1930s. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 22, 229-249.
- LLEWELLYN, M. 2004b. Designed by women and designing women: gender, planning and the geographies of the kitchen in Britain 1917-1946. *Cultural Geographies*, 11, 42-60.
- LLOYD, J. & JOHNSON, L. 2004. Dream stuff: the postwar home and the Australian housewife, 1940 - 60. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 22, 251-272.
- LONGHURST, R., JOHNSTON, L. & HO, E. 2009. A visceral approach: Cooking 'at home' with migrant women in New Zealand. *Transaction of the Institute of British Geographers* 34, 333–345.
- MEAH, A. 2014. Reconceptualizing power and gendered subjectivities in domestic cooking spaces. *Progress in Human Geography*, 38, 671-690.
- MEAH, A. in press. Materializing memory, mood and agency: the emotional geographies of the modern kitchen. *Gastronomica*.
- MEAH, A. & JACKSON, P. 2013. Crowded kitchens: the 'democratisation' of domesticity? *Gender, Place & Culture*, 20, 578-596.
- MEAH, A. and JACKSON, P. In press. Re-imagining the kitchen as a site of memory. *Social & Cultural Geography*. DOI: 10.1080/14649365.2015.1089587
- MEAH, A., WILLS, W., DICKINSON, A. & SHORT, F. 2013. "The heart of the home" locating the kitchen within the shifting emotional landscape of domestic life. Royal

Geographic Society/Institute of British Geographers Annual International Conference, 28-30 August 2013.

MILLER, D. 1988. Appropriating the state in the council estate. *Man*, 23, 2, 353-372.

MILLER, R. 1991. Selling Mrs Consumer: advertising and the creation of suburban socio-spatial relations, 1910-1930, *Antipode*, 23(3), 263-301.

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART (MoMA). 2014. Accessed 13 August 2015.

[http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/counter\\_space](http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/counter_space).

[http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/counter\\_space/the\\_frankfurt\\_kitchen](http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/counter_space/the_frankfurt_kitchen).

[http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/counter\\_space/visions\\_of\\_plenty](http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/counter_space/visions_of_plenty)

[http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/counter\\_space/kitchen\\_sink\\_dramas](http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/counter_space/kitchen_sink_dramas)

NICKLES, S. 2002. Preserving Women: Refrigerator Design as Social Process in the 1930's. *Technology and Culture* 43, 693–727

OXFORD DICTIONARIES 2015. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/kitchen>

Accessed 17 August 2015.

PARTINGTON, A. 1995. The designer housewife in the 1950s, in Attfield, J. and Kirkham, P. (eds) *A View from the Interior: women and design*. London: Women's Press, pp. 206-14.

PASCALI, L. 2006. Two Stoves, Two Refrigerators, Due Cucine: The Italian immigrant home with two kitchens. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 13, 685-695.

PERCIVAL, P. 2002. Domestic spaces: uses and meanings in the daily lives of older people. *Ageing and Society*, 22, 729-749.

POLLACK, S. 2011. The rolling pin. In Turkle, S. (ed) *Evocative Objects: things we think with*.

Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, pp. 224-231.

REID, S.E. 2002. "Cold War in the kitchen: gender and the de-Stalinization of consumer taste in the Soviet Under Khrushchev." *Slavic Review*, 61: 211-252.

ROOS, G., PRÄTTÄLÄ, R. & KOSKI, K. 2001. Men, Masculinity and Food: Interviews with Finnish Carpenters and Engineers. *Appetite*, 37, 47.

- ROSE, G. Family Photographs and Domestic Spacings: A Case Study. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 28(1), 5-18.
- SAARIKANGAS, K. 2006. Displays of the Everyday. Relations between gender and the visibility of domestic work in the modern Finnish kitchen from the 1930s to the 1950s. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 13, 161-172.
- SCANLAN, J. 2011. Counter Space: Design and the Modern Kitchen. *Home Cultures*, 8, 341-344.
- SHORT, F. 2006. *Kitchen Secrets: The meaning of cooking in everyday life*, Oxford, Berg.
- SCHNEIDERMAN, D. 2010. The prefabricated kitchen: substance and surface. *Home Cultures*, 7(3), 243-262.
- SHOVE, E., WATSON, M., HAND, M. & INGRAM, J. 2007. *The Design of Everyday Life*. Oxford, Berg.
- SHOVE, E. and SOUTHERTON, D. 2000. Defrosting the freezer: from novelty to convenience: a narrative of normalisation. *Journal of Material Culture*, 5, 301-319.
- SILVA, E. 2000. The cook, the cooker and the gendering of the kitchen, *The Sociological Review* 48(4), 612-628.
- SOCHUREK, H. 1959. Timelife\_image\_248021, The Life Picture Collection, Getty Images.  
<http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/soviet-premier-nikita-khrushchev-pointing-finger-at-news-photo/50475727>
- SUPSKI, S. 2006. 'It Was Another Skin': The kitchen as home for Australian post-war immigrant women. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 13, 133-141.
- SUTTON, D. 2001. *Remembrances of Repasts: an anthropology of food and memory*. Oxford, Berg.
- SUTTON, D. 2008. Tradition and Modernity revisited: existential memory work on a Greek island. *History & Memory*, 20(2), 84-105.
- SUTTON, D. 2011. Memory as a sense: a gustemological approach. *Food, Culture & Society* 14(4), 468-475.
- SWENSON, R. 2009. Domestic divo: televised treatments of masculinity, femininity and food. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 26, 36-53.

- SZABO, M. 2013. Foodwork or Foodplay? Men's Domestic Cooking, Privilege and Leisure. *Sociology*, 47, 623-638.
- VAN CAUDENBERG, A. & HEYNEN, H. 2004. The Rational Kitchen in the Interwar Period in Belgium: Discourses and Realities. *Home Cultures*, 1, 23-50.
- WATKINS, H. 2006. Beauty Queen, Bulletin Board and Browser: Rescripting the refrigerator. *Gender, Place and Culture* 13(2), 143-152.
- WILLS, W. MEAH, A. DICKINSON, A. & SHORT, F. (2013) *Domestic Kitchen Practices: findings from the 'Kitchen Life' study*. Unit Report 24, prepared for the FSA Social Science Research Committee. [http://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/818-1-1496\\_KITCHEN\\_LIFE\\_FINAL\\_REPORT\\_10-07-13.pdf](http://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/818-1-1496_KITCHEN_LIFE_FINAL_REPORT_10-07-13.pdf) Accessed 27 August 2015.
- WORDEN, S. 1989. Powerful Women: Electricity in the Home 1919–1940. In Attfield, J and Kirkham, P. (eds) *The View from the Interior*. London, The Women's Press, pp. 128–47.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Miller 1991

<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere (Meah 2014) I have reviewed the literature concerning gender, power and domestic foodwork, via which I provide a revisionist account of women's power in the kitchen. For this reason, I do not include such a discussion here.

<sup>3</sup> For a broader review of the relationship between house/work and the home as a site of work and consumption, see Cox 2013.

<sup>4</sup> See also Freeman 2004.

<sup>5</sup> In addition to the work discussed here, see also Freeman (2004) for a general overview as well as a specific discussion of the UK, and Cieraad (2002) reporting on The Netherlands.

<sup>6</sup> The application of time-and-motion methods in the analysis of kitchen practices has been satirised in the Nordic film *Kitchen Stories* (Salmer fra Kjøkkenet 2003).

<sup>7</sup> The principles of Taylorism rationalised factory production along scientific lines to maximise production (See also Hollows 2000: 124).

<sup>8</sup> For more on prefabricated kitchens see Schneiderman 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Source: MoMA 2014

[http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/counter\\_space/the\\_frankfurt\\_kitchen](http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/counter_space/the_frankfurt_kitchen). Accessed 13 August 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Source: Jerram (2006, p. 542).

<sup>11</sup> Source: Llewellyn (2004b, p. 53).

<sup>12</sup> See also, Lloyd and Johnson 2004, Partington 1995.

---

<sup>13</sup> See also Freeman (2004).

<sup>14</sup> Llewellyn's (2004a, pp. 243-244) data indicates that the use of uniform colours – browns and creams – was reported as common practice among many social housing trusts which, it was felt, reinforced residents' working-classness. The use of a wider range of colours, including pastel shades, at the Kensal House development was welcomed as affording residents 'a sense of cultural capital and a rise in status'.

<sup>15</sup> See also Schneiderman 2010.

<sup>16</sup> See [http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/counter\\_space/visions\\_of\\_plenty](http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/counter_space/visions_of_plenty). Accessed 13 August 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Source: Howard Sochurek 1959. <http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/soviet-premier-nikita-khrushchev-pointing-finger-at-news-photo/50475727>

<sup>18</sup> On cooking technologies, see for example, Silva 2000; Truninger, 2011. On cold storage, see Isenstadt 1998 Shove and Southerton 2000; Watkins 2006; and on the parallel histories of the freezer and microwave oven, see Cockburn and Ormrod 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Chapman and Hockey 1999; Cieraad 2002; Cockburn and Fürst-Dilic 1994; Cowan 1998; Doorly 1999; Ehrenreich and English 1979; Meah and Jackson 2013; Nickles 2002; Silva 2000; Worden 1989.

<sup>20</sup> See for example, Aarseth 2009; Brownlie and Hewer 2007; Cairns et al. 2010; Holden 2005; Hollows 2003; Meah 2014; Meah and Jackson 2013; Roos et al. 2001; Short 2006; Swenson 2009; Szabo 2013.

<sup>21</sup> See [http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/counter\\_space/kitchen\\_sink\\_dramas](http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/counter_space/kitchen_sink_dramas). Accessed 13 August 2015.

<sup>22</sup> See for example, Holtzman 2006; Sutton 2001, 2008, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Source: Meah and Jackson, In press.