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Women in the Kitchen: The Performativity of Modern Living

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Women in the Kitchen: The Performativity of Modern Living

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Abstract

It may be presumed that today's 'modern' woman is no longer tethered to the domestic realm. However, at the end of 2020, a UN report stated that as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic, women were spending an increased amount of time within the home, setting back gender-equality progress by 'at least 25 years' (Lungumbu & Butterly, 2020) (UN Women, 2020). This paper will identify and examine the complexities surrounding the 'modern' woman's relationship with her kitchen and the roles of women in today's modern homes. Does the 'modern', open-plan kitchen design construct domestic roles within the house – are they as labour-saving as we may think? The paper will analyse promotional imagery from the 20th and 21st centuries as well as elements of popular culture. This analysis will occur alongside the main research source of the paper, which is a focus group detailing the experiences of five women examining their relationships with their kitchens. Open to all identifying genders, sexualities, and age groups, that the 5 participants who responded to the call are cis women in heterosexual relationships perhaps corroborates the traditionally gendered aspect of domestic labour. This paper will also cover the performativity of managing a work/life balance, how the advent of open-plan living spaces has affected the management of domestic duty, the performative elements of modern living and finally, the power of female dominance in the kitchen and the cultural capital it holds.

The aim of the paper is to identify key themes within the subject of 'Women in the Kitchen' and to extract potential directions for further study. Regarding future research, it would be beneficial to gain insight from different types of households – single parent and households including members of the wider LGBTQIA+ community. The benefit of this would be to further examine the felt and the perceived nature of women in the kitchen from different viewpoints.

Keywords: ideal homes, modern-woman, open-plan kitchen, domestic duty, labour-saving

1. Introduction

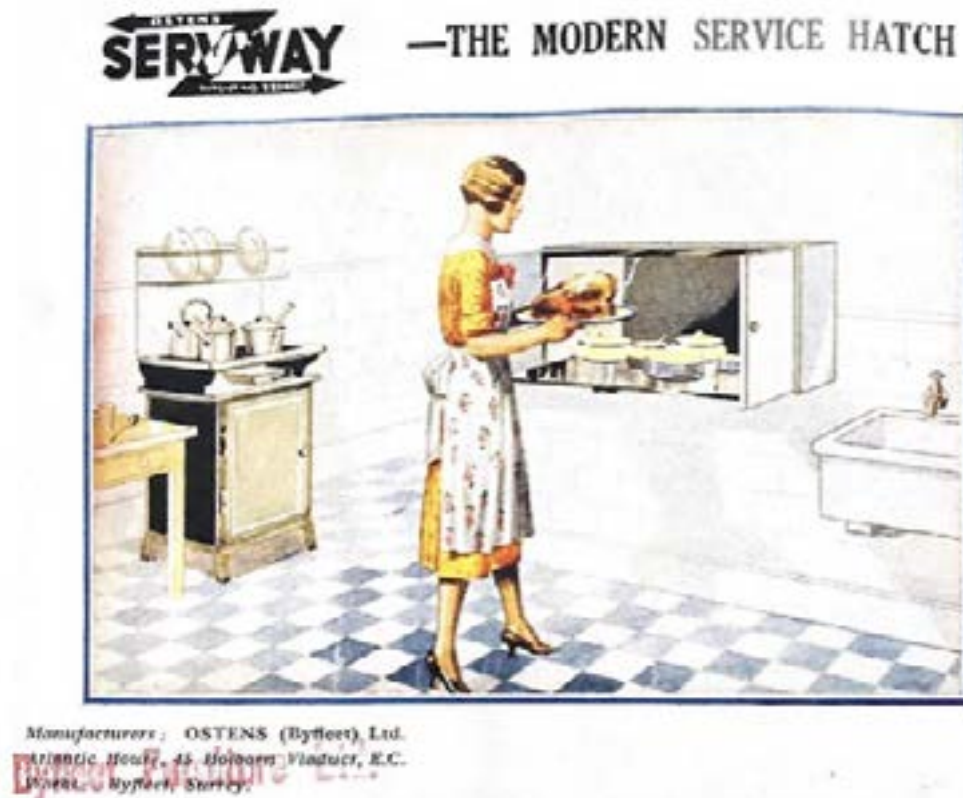
Like many women in 2020, I found myself on furlough and enjoyed the opportunity to perfect all things domestic, which I could not do when working 40 hours a week in the fashion industry, and this really played with my perception of self as a 'modern woman'.

The concept of modernity is key to this study, so I will begin by briefly discussing the feminine relationship with modernity in architecture and interior design. Modern design has been seen as an elitist movement in these spheres, actively rejecting popular design preference (Brindley, 1999) (Giles, 2004). Moreover, in this 'modernist' vs. 'populist' debate, women have been aligned

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with the less academically perceived mass culture (Ryan, 2018) (Sparke, 2010). For the last two centuries, modernity in the home has been reachable for women via commodities (Sparke, 2010)(see Fig 1). This paper will primarily focus on the kitchen, as it has been stated that for women, modernity entered the domestic realm “through the back door and into the kitchen” (Morris in Ryan, 2018:93).

Figure 1. Advertisement for dining hatch, Ostens Servway: the modern service hatch, c.1930's. (Ryan,



2018) Advertisements like these were designed to present that a ‘modern’ lifestyle could be purchased and were aimed at the housewife.

Advertisements like these were designed to present that a ‘modern’ lifestyle could be purchased and were aimed at the housewife.

Defining a ‘modern’ woman is complex, but I have posited that a ‘modern’ woman is an individual who recognises the contemporary patriarchal system and seeks a life where her experiences are not based upon her identity as a woman.

2. Women and the Kitchen: In Two Places at Once

The participants from the focus group alluded to their issues with finding a work/life balance- a struggle many a ‘modern’ woman has experienced (Wilson, 2000)(see Fig 2). Participant 1 stated that she found the pressure to perform as a successful modern woman, to fulfil the classic familial role of being a “great mother” and providing financially as a single mum- completely overwhelming. Participant 4 also shared their experience as a working mother, stating that it was only after experiencing a “full mental breakdown” that she realised it was simply not possible to “do it all”. For those participants without children, one explained her anxieties around her future as a working mother - “... there are many question marks on how you are going to do it all”. Participant 5 (a designer in the fashion industry) declared that none of the women in her department, working at the highest level, have children. These remarks represent the multiple pressures women feel to perform in an aspirational society.



Figure 2. Article by Cathleen Medwick for Vogue. New York. Volume 168, Issues 8. August 1978. 180-181. This image presents some of the anxieties felt by modern women in finding a work/life balance, (Vogue, 1978).

How does this relate to the kitchen? The modern kitchen has been founded on the need for women to reduce the time taken to complete domestic duties (Sparks, 2008) (Lancaster, 2006).

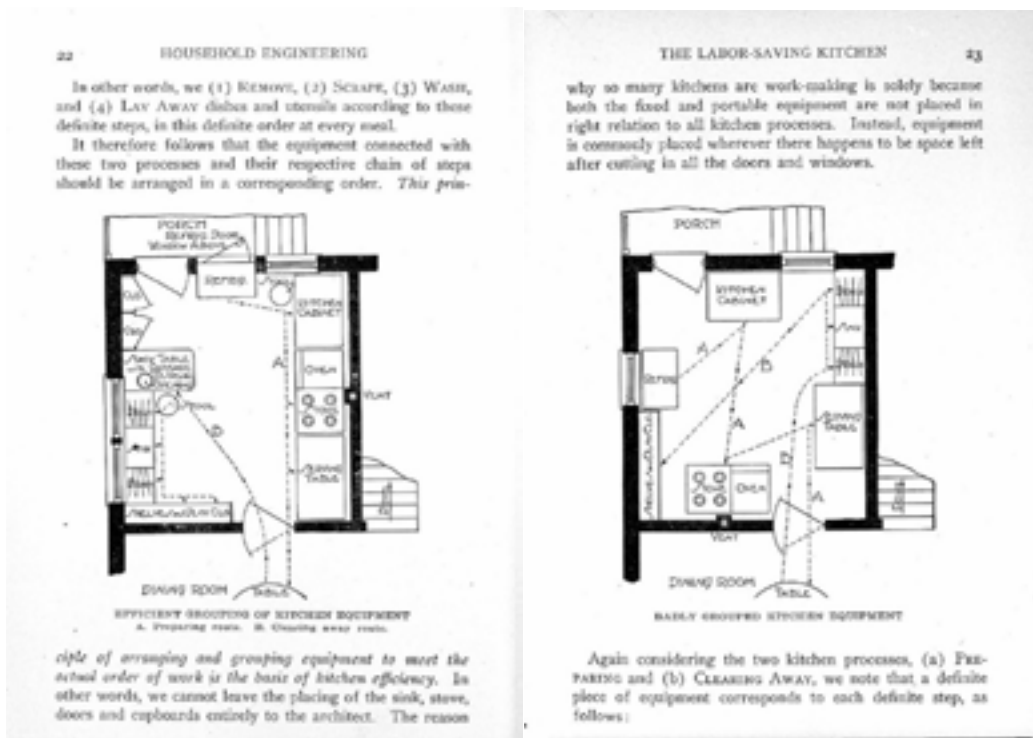


Figure 3. Pages 22 & 23 Frederick, C., 1923. Household Engineering. [book]. American School of Home Economics, Chicago

"Many manuals promoted the idea of the labour-saving home, setting out to persuade women that the project of rationalising and organising their house-holds would lead to greater freedom" (Sparke, 2010, p. 107).

Integral to today's modern kitchen design is the Frankfurt Kitchen (Museum of Modern Art, 2010) as well as Engineer-cum-psychologist Lillian Gilbreth's studies on streamlining domestic tasks (Lancaster, 2006) and Christine Frederick's 1923 book 'Household Engineering' (see Fig 3) used by homemakers wanting to minimise domestic tasks at the height of the 'servant problem' (Sparke, 2008) (Rutherford, 1996). Each of these approaches to modern kitchen design was framed around increasing productivity and efficiency whilst reducing the time taken by women to complete domestic tasks. Today, the kitchen must be a space that continues to minimise domestic labour as women find themselves in their most demanding role yet (Wilson, 2000). However, innate to modern kitchen design remains the idea that women are still the forebearers of domestic and familial responsibility, with Gilbreth herself intending to "emphasise that efficiency should never get in the way of family relationships." (Lancaster, 2006, p. 259). In society, it appears that women must still complete their domestic duties, and the modern kitchen is a tool for women to achieve a better work/life balance.

3. Open-Plan Living and Performance

A key aspect of British suburban housing built during the early part of the 20th century was the placement of the kitchen at the back of the home with a "symbolic differentiation of front and back, public and private" (Madigan & Munro, 1999 pp. 62-63). But today's 'modern' house features open-plan living with a seemingly efficient and modern kitchen-diner. With no backstage' in which to hide domestic 'mess', the household is on permanent display, with the women of the house performing as both host and servant in the continuum (Madigan & Munro, 1999).



Figure 4. Hostess Trolley Advertisement form EKCO c.1970s via Bridgeman Images. (EKCO, c.19700's) The caption on this advertisement for a Hostess Trolley presents women's anxieties around hosting prior to the open-plan kitchen.

The service hatch is the predecessor to today's modern, open-plan living, enabling the housewife to "shut the door on the mess left from the preparations of the evening meal..." (Sugg-Ryan, 2018:32). However, today's modern kitchen is an open-plan space, with the kitchen located directly off the living room, removing the 'backstage' in which to hide domestic mess but also offering an advantageous viewpoint from which to assess the domestic situation (Madigan & Munro, 1999). Open-plan kitchens surely liberate women, for they can complete domestic duties whilst still involved with family life, but with open-plan living comes the issue of performativity (see Fig 4).

The pros and cons of the open-plan kitchen design are discussed by participants 2 and 4. Participant 2 stated that her dream was to have an open-plan living space so she could multi-task, balancing domestic duty with socialising. However, participant 4 (see Fig 5 for Kitchen Image) stated that when hosting, most people end up sitting in the kitchen whilst she cooks and that she would prefer to have a separate hosting space to send them to say, "Well, you know what it is like, people come in the kitchen, and they get in your way". When asked to elaborate on this, she explained that she did not want people "stood up watching" as she performed her domestic tasks. In this example, the performativity of modern living is clear – open-plan kitchens can create a feeling of anxiety to perform as the idyllic host whilst providing no space to hide the domestic mess.

4. Professionalism and Ownership

Identified through the focus group was a reluctance to confront that women are still intrinsically linked with the domestic realm. Participant 1 deliberated this point "I asked myself this question quite a lot, actually. Is it inherent in me to take on the cooking because I am a woman? Or is it just because I enjoy doing the cooking?". After Participant 4 discussed the anxiety she felt when hosting, the work required to keep her 'glossy' worktops clean and how in the kitchen her husband "does what he is told," I asked whether she thought the kitchen was a gendered space, she said "It is probably not to do with being a woman. It is because I am a control freak and want it to go well". Participant 4 appears to distance herself from the domestic labour and anxieties she had just described, dismissing that it has anything to do with gender.



Figure 5. Participant 4's Open-Plan Kitchen/Diner. 2021. Author's own, (Johnson, 2021).

Noticeable during the discussion was how participants would speak with a sense of pride regarding their skills in the kitchen. For example, participant 4 mentioned that she has two ovens "like the

ones on the Bake Off” and how proud she was of them, receiving audible ‘wow’s’ from the rest of the group and demonstrating the cultural capital that goes alongside successfully portraying domesticity (Featherstone, 1991) (Visser, 1997). There is also a professional aspect to work in the kitchen. The ability to operate machinery and engage with modern technologies provides a genuine sense of achievement (Sparke, 2010), and the kitchen becomes a workshop (Giles, 2004)(see Fig 6). Participant 4 would refer to her work in the kitchen in an almost professional lexicon – “We will do a walkthrough and try and make it as smooth as possible” and “I sort of run it.”.



Figure 6. A woman demonstrating ‘electrical cooking apparatus’ at the Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition, 1934. The lab coat worn shows the professional, scientific aspect of women in the kitchen. (Ideal Homes, 1934).

The modern kitchen is increasingly becoming a space that disguises itself, bare and sparse surfaces on top of nameless cupboards and concealed gadgets. It could be suggested that in the modern kitchen, the gender assigned to that space is less explicitly stated in its design than in kitchens gone before. However, participant 2, despite having a self-described ‘modern kitchen’ (see Fig 7), accepted that she completes most domestic tasks. “I always felt as a woman that it was my duty to do all those domestic things, and cooking was one of them..’.



Figure 7. Participant 2’s open-plan living space and kitchen. The original 1930s semi-detached layout has been modernised and opened up to create a multi-functional kitchen/living/dining space. 2021 (Johnson, 2021)

Participant 4 also referred to her husband during the focus group: “[Husband] works ever so hard but he has no idea of the whole planning of the event...but in his brain is he thinks he is worked hard but has not got a clue.”. These remarks should not be dismissed as trivial and marital but representative of women’s ownership of the kitchen and associated tasks, reflecting the narrative of male ineptitude at domestic duty and the dominance of women in the kitchen.

Lastly, the concealed, streamlined modern kitchen means that for some women, the more they use the space, the more that space becomes unfamiliar and alien to the rest of the household, entering a paradox where the power of women in the kitchen “ultimately serves to reinforce their sense of personal oppression” (Chapman, 1999, p. 178).

5. Concluding Remarks

During the first half of the 20th century, domestic roles were clearly defined – women stayed home, and men went to work. Today, roles are not explicit and must instead be negotiated. This research suggests that there is an ongoing frustration for women today regarding their relationships with their kitchens, and for the ‘modern woman’, it can be difficult to escape these gendered norms even 70+ years from the 1950s housewife. The relationship between women and the kitchen remains complex – is the modern open-plan kitchen truly labour-saving, or do they demand a higher level of upkeep? Does the labour required to maintain the concealed, modern aesthetic increase the anxiety to perform? This research suggests that our modern homes may not reflect the needs of the modern woman.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Endnotes

This paper has been presented at the SPACE International Conference 2021 on Gender, Space and Architecture.

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