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Kitchen Politics



**DURING THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY, THE KITCHEN, SPECIFICALLY THE MINIMUM KITCHEN, BECAME A POLITICAL TOOL ABLE TO LINK MACRO AND MICROECONOMIES THROUGH THE REDEFINITION OF HOUSEHOLD LABOR AND GENDER ROLES. THE CONSEQUENCES OF THIS ARE STILL EVIDENT. HOUSEWORK BECAME, ACCORDING TO SILVIA FEDERICI, THE 'LABOR OF LOVE,' AND SUBSEQUENTLY LOST ITS ASSOCIATED WAGE. THE WAYS IN WHICH THE KITCHEN WAS DEFINED DURING THIS PERIOD CANNOT BE CONSIDERED AN INNOCUOUS STORY.**

# DOMESTIC NETWORKS WORK

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The first minimum and compact kitchen has been related to the Frankfurt Kitchen designed by the Austrian architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky in 1926. Of course, Schütte-Lihotzky's ideas, although considered the flagship of early modernism within the domestic sphere, were neither isolated nor created from scratch. Schütte-Lihotzky was acquainted with the theories of the North American domestic engineer Christine Frederick, whose 1913 book *The New Housekeeping: Efficiency Studies in Home Management* was translated into German in 1922. Frederick was interested in making the kitchen more efficient by applying motion studies and other Taylorist methods. For her the kitchen was a home 'labor-saving device', where everything was well organized and compact to facilitate daily cooking and other housekeeping tasks.

Meanwhile the story of this paradigmatically fitted kitchen is well known, as is the influence that Frederick's theories about domestic engineering, labor-saving devices and efficiency had on Schütte-Lihotzky work. However there is a side of its North American background that has been largely missed or forgotten. To recuperate that oversight is key to understanding the actual condition of the kitchen and labor at home.

Prior to the emergence of the minimum kitchen in Europe, the term 'kitchenette' began to be widely used in the United States to designate a kitchen typology that could occupy a reduced space. The kitchenette initially appeared in apartment hotels and hostels, a housing typology that, at that time, was commonly used not only by visitors but also by permanent residents, with different social and economic backgrounds. 'Living à la carte' was a desirable way of living due to the comforts that these types of buildings could offer, eliminating the annoyances of housekeeping

by offering professional domestic services and other types of collective amenities and spaces. The kitchenette appeared then as a new commodity for these residents, offering them the possibility of quickly cooking in the apartment.

Before its commercial appearance, tenants had already grown accustomed to improvising their own cooking devices. Stoves and other culinary gadgets ended up occupying any corner of the room or closet to allow residents to cook from time to time. Behind this improvised existence was an economic reason. The ability to prepare some meals in the kitchenless apartments, thus skipping the collective ones, amounted to considerable savings by the end of the month. In addition, among the wealthier sector, the kitchenette satisfied something much simpler and hedonistic: the desire to cook at any time. These new kitchen devices allowed for an understanding of cooking as a pleasure rather than a duty.

As the *New York Times* claimed, half of New York's population lived under the kitchenette system and the other half wanted to. The compact kitchen did not arise so much out of a need to optimize the organization of the kitchen, a typical 'labor-saving' argument, but instead it simply met an existing need in this housing typology while minimizing the loss of space. Although originally the kitchenette was a 'space saving' device, progressively its image became loaded with other meanings and connotations, among them 'domestic efficiency'.

Terms such as scientific work organization, labor saving devices and efficiency began to be widely used in relation to the home during the 1910s after the popularization of Scientific Management. But interest in mixing science with domestic space started long before. During the 1870s, in res-

ponse to industrialization, so-called 'cooking schools' began to appear.

Since the beginning of this relationship between education and domesticity, there was a dilemma regarding what was sought from the study and the professionalization of the domestic sphere. Among those supporters of this domestic scientism, two groups could be clearly discerned. On one hand, there were those who believed that domestic professionalization was necessary to facilitate some house work while maintaining certain values based on women as the center of the home. On the other hand, there were those who believed that home professionalization would offer access to academic studies and their work out of home, erasing the role of women from the domestic sphere.

The evolution of the kitchenette and the change of values that this minimal kitchen suffered during the first decades of the 20th century, is related with these two ways of understanding the professionalization of domestic tasks.

The growing interest in labor-saving devices meant that the kitchenette progressively lost its original co-operative character and gained autonomy. Its small size, initially deriving from the dimensions of a closet, took another meaning. The kitchenette gradually became understood as an instrument through which women were able to carry out domestic tasks quickly, efficiently and autonomously.

Due to the progressive disappearance of domestic services at the turn of the century, more and more tasks fell on the 'housewife.' Progressively the housewife

became the only one responsible for the homework. Frederick, and other domestic engineers, faced that situation, building up a new domestic image in which the woman was trained to complete all household tasks by herself successfully, thanks to efficient work organization and the use of new labor-saving devices. Surprisingly, as Dolores Hayden points out, her work falls into a contradiction difficult to solve: she tried to apply scientific methods, based on the division of work and specialization, on a single person. Relying on the housewife as the unique housekeeper, made the division of work impossible.

## THE KITCHENETTE BECAME THE 'PERFECT' MECHANICAL DEVICE THROUGH WHICH THIS LABOR PROBLEM COULD BE APPARENTLY SOLVED.

Many reasons caused the Frankfurt Kitchen to be designed – the kitchenette had lost all the implications and dependencies with a larger domestic infrastructure.

The debate initiated during the 1870s at schools of home economics were solved thanks to this device and a type of 'living à la carte,' where domestic work was considered paid labor and not necessarily reliant on women, started its decay.

Like in the 19th century, homes of the future, fully equipped with new appliances and technological devices, maintain the old motto – organization, labor saving, efficiency – and a promise of ending to home labor. Maybe we should recall here Cedric Price: technology is the answer... but what was the question?