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# The Cooking Space: dialogues between House and Food

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## ABSTRACT

Throughout human history, *house* and *food* have been inseparable. Not only did fire occupy the symbolic and physical center of the hut, but it also fulfilled a practical function: cooking food. The space and social context in which this activity took place has, however, evolved. This research will explore this evolution of the *cooking space* — the transformations in its architectural position and configuration, but also their underlying social, cultural and technological motives — focusing on the *Western urban context*, particularly the houses of the *upper* and *middle classes*, crossing historical data from different sources, to fully grasp and characterize its paradigmatic models, from the Middle Ages till today. This article will show how the position of the cooking space reflects the social hierarchy of its occupants, while a close connection can be found between technological advances in the control of fire and culinary preparations, which either trigger, or derive from them.

## 1 THE BEGINNING

### 1.1 *Introduction: the kitchen as a symbol*

The evolution of *cooking spaces* in the house — also referred to as *kitchen* — is essentially the story of taming fire, but also of social transformations: the importance given to cooking food, and the ones in charge of it, their social class or position, had an effect on where this space was located, who entered it, how it was organized, if it was highlighted.

The kitchen has a symbolic role within the house. Here, food is prepared by someone, for someone, with all its underlying meanings. It was traditionally a *female* space, due to women's role in the house, reflected often in the very idea of home-cooked food, like the examples of *Mom's apple pie* or *Pasta di mamma* (Steel, 2013: 170). Cooking food, an activity filled with smells and noises, was connoted with biological functions, a side of human existence at times hidden as much as possible, due to the remembrance of closeness to animals. Women were more associated with this natural and instinctive side — and men to the rational and reasonable one — as they evidence some 'natural behaviors' (pregnancy, breastfeeding, menstruation). Considered to be closer to animals, women — as well as people from perceived lower social classes — were often regarded as inferior, and, therefore, so were the activities they were in charge of and their spaces, relegating the domestic cooking spaces to secluded locations.

Later, with industrialization, food processing and conservation developments, and key social transformations, cooking food progressively looses its character of domestic chore, and gains one of leisure and self-expression. This is translated into space, and today a renovated importance is given to the kitchen and its inhabitants, both male and female.

### 1.2 *Taming fire: how man became human*

The conquest and mastery over fire has been pointed by several authors, both academics and scientists, and in symbolic myths and legends, as the decisive turning point when man became *human*. By overcoming the psychological barriers of handling fire, instead of instinctively fleeing, symbolically man *transcended* his animal nature. Fire allowed man to protect from beasts, cook food, get warm, and build a whole new world: fire transforms clay into ceramics, water into steam, metals into weapons, darkness into light. Without fire, *civilization* wouldn't exist.

In several myths, fire was a divine element stolen from the gods, carrying serious consequences for humanity and the ones that stole it, as shown by the myth of Prometheus. Fire — the symbol of knowledge — allowed man not to depend on, but to control Nature, making him, in a way, divine.

Fire was the decisive civilizing element, but not any fire: it was the *culinary* one. By cooking food, new sources of energy were available, and human beings' physical structure changed, growing bigger brains and smaller guts, evolving into *Homo erectus*, and biologically becoming *human* (Pollan, 2013: 7-57). The act of cooking food becomes the human activity *par excellence*, the gesture that transforms nature into something *cultural*. Conversely, the absence of fire, the inability to cook food, is seen as a regression to bestiality. This symbolic opposition between *raw* and *cooked*, as metaphor for the dichotomy Nature/Culture, was argued by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his essay *The culinary triangle* (1968).

Several authors have also established a direct link between fire and the origin of *domestic* Architecture — the primitive hut — that reunites and protects the family. However, the views on the role of fire in this

process are divergent. Semper describes fire as the *first* element of architecture, which precedes the roof, the walls and the floor. Since fire is instable, the function of these elements, of Architecture itself, was to safeguard fire from the three other natural, hostile elements: water, air and earth, respectively (Semper, 1989: 102). For other authors, fire was the civilizing element. Vitruvius describes an early age in which men were born as beasts, fleeing in the face of fire created during storms. Later, allured by the warmth, men gathered around it and started sharing ideas and knowledge (Vitruvius, 2006: 71). Language was born and, combined with verticality and manual dexterity, it allowed men to conceive and build shelters, and Architecture arose.

Fire took the physical and symbolic center of the house, the *focus* (in Latin, 'hearth') of its activities. The presence of fire turns a house into a *home* — referring the Spanish *hogar* to 'home' and 'hearth', and the Portuguese *lar* to both 'home' and the stone over which fire was lit, originating *lareira* ('hearth'). Initially, fire was kept in a pit, with smoke going up vertically to an *oculus* ('hole') in the roof. Fire established, thus, the symbolic link between *heaven* and *earth*, divine and mundane. Over time, this fire changed, as well as the space where it was kept.

## 2 FIRE: A JOURNEY WITHIN THE HOUSE

### 2.1 *Middle Ages*

It is this primordial character that the culinary fire took in the late urban medieval house. Located in walled towns, where space for expansion was limited, the houses occupied narrow plots, having two or three floors. The street front was occupied by the shop or workshop, being work and domestic spaces merged into one (Schoenauer, 2000: 228-258). Taking the building's full height, the *hall* occupied the back of the house, often being its totality.

The hall was a multifunctional space, where different activities — sleeping, working, doing business, cooking and eating — coexisted and interacted. This derived partially from an enlarged understanding of *family*, which included family members, servants, apprentices, friends, and guests, not existing a sense of *privacy* (Rybczynski, 2003: 36-39). Since the space was one, it was furniture that defined different uses: the furniture pieces were polyvalent and constantly 'moved' (as shown in Latin languages: *móveis*, *muebles*, *meubles*, etc.), and assembled as needed, giving rise to the expression 'set the table' (Rybczynski, 2003: 38). Since people in charge of cooking were 'family', this activity and fire itself took a core position within the house, often in a pit guarded overnight to prevent it from extinguish.

In a time of crop uncertainty and famine, having enough food to eat was of the uttermost importance, carrying a social status on itself. In this context, the meat roast was the privileged medieval meal, symbolizing power, virility and wealth (Flandrin & Montanari, 2001: 20). Curiously, it was this emphasis laid on roasted and smoked meat that propelled the first transformations in the cooking space, within the realm that dominated and regulated every aspect of the medieval daily life: the Church.

The monasteries were full functioning cities, sheltering hundreds of people, and having autonomous buildings for specific activities, including cooking food, which enabled major developments in culinary spaces. Numerous tall windows were introduced, and ventilation perfected, having primary and secondary chimneys — designed to roast several animals and fowls simultaneously —, and side chambers to smoke meat or keep food warm. The sloping pavements directed the washing waters to central sewages (Espinet, 1984: 33-44). These improvements were developed by the monks, in charge of designing the spaces and cooking in them, being therefore concerned with the working conditions.

These buildings were taken as models for the upper classes' domestic architecture. However, since here servants were the ones cooking, cooking spaces progressively moved to basements and became mere *service* spaces (Espinet, 1984: 49-58).

### 2.2 *Modern Era*

The development of the *modern house* was a slow and complex process. Up until the 17th century, the Parisian middle-class house occupied the medieval plot, having a ground floor shop and living quarters in the upper floors. The house started to be divided in different rooms, but with non-specific uses: guests were received in the bedroom, meals taken in various rooms. Only the kitchen had a predefined use. All these rooms communicated through aligned *enfilade* doors (Rybczynski, 2003: 48-52).

In the 18th century, the Parisian house and work place separated, becoming the house a *private* space for the family. This progressively translated into a separation of public and private areas, and reserving particular rooms to specific activities: sleeping, entertaining, cooking. A gradation of privacy may be found from the reception spaces to the most intimate ones, both in the apartment buildings (*maisons-à-loyer*) and the private dwellings (*hôtels*), as well as a clear separation between family and servants, now lodged in separate areas of the house and mediated by an increasing number of devices to keep them invisible: *dumbwaiters*, bells, stoves fueled from openings on the wall, and, of course, the *corridor* (Rybczynski, 2003: 95-96; Zapata, 2002: 38).

Opposing the urban French society, the English valued country life above city life, being their London town-houses mere adaptions of the idealized countryside ones. Each Georgian family house took

one plot — unlike the French apartment buildings, shared by families ranked according to their incomes — with classical proportions and undecorated façades (Schoenauer, 2000: 284). The ground floor included a *parlour* and the *dining room*, facing the back garden and directly above the service areas, located in the (semi-)basement, so that service was made easy, but smells and noises kept away. The first floor had two *drawing rooms*, and, above it, there were the bedrooms. Servants were lodged in the last floor (Schoenauer, 2000: 282-283).

The kitchen was subdivided into spaces devoted to specific activities, being each house almost self-sufficient (Harrison, 1972: 67-78). We also witness improvements in kitchen utensils — pans, skewers, pressure cookers, grills — and in the cooking device (Espinet, 1984: 62-65). The upgrades in chimneys had been slow, but, in late 18th century, Count Rumford finally designed the first *stove*. For the first time, fire was under control, and the stove optimized the cooking process, allowing several dishes to be cooked at once, and also fresh cooking techniques, thanks to the now adjustable temperatures (Espinet, 1984: 82). These new potentialities met the expectations of the growing bourgeoisie, who craved for more delicate, subtle tasting meals, respecting the flavor of the distinct ingredients (Flandrin & Montanari, 2001: 157). Quality was valued over quantity — due to the more stable food supply — and food etiquette rules became important devices of social differentiation (Steel, 2013: 218).

### 2.3 *19th century*

Despite major developments in manufacturing processes, railways, urbanization, and food conservation, that changed urban life in many aspects, the nineteenth-century houses were mainly a melioration of the tendencies triggered in the previous century.

The English country house was still the reference for the urban ones, with its residential quarters (hall, drawing room, dining room, library, gallery, bedrooms, etc.) and domestic offices, set around a working courtyard in the back (Muthesius, 2007: 35-59). The service area was presided by the kitchen, and complemented by sculleries, pantries, larders, washing areas, dairy room, buttery, bake house, brewery, winery, icehouse, linen-rooms, etc. The kitchen was devoted exclusively to food preparation, with a stove, a large central table, and washable surfaces (Muthesius, 2007: 69). This was the domestic reference vertically adapted to the town-houses, originating the known *upstairs/downstairs* model (Steel, 2013: 179; Muthesius, 2007: 140-151).

The Parisian houses had similar spatial divisions — social areas, private areas, service areas — horizontal in the case of the *maisons-à-loyer* and vertical for the *hôtels*. Initially, the kitchen took a secluded position, but progressively moved closer to the entrance or the dining room (Eleb & Debarre, 1995: 122). Unlike the English culinary complex, the French cooking area occupied one single space. This confrontation between cuisine and space was surprising for both cultures, when the difference of area taken by the culinary activities within the house, in each country, was compared with the simplicity of English cuisine and complexity of the French one (Muthesius, 2007: 61).

During the 19th century, stoves evolved from coal to gas, to electricity, becoming increasingly compact (Espinet, 1984: 110). Almost every appliance we know today was invented: dishwasher, washing machine, refrigerator, freezer, mixers, blenders, and so on (Harrison, 1972: 117). The kitchen space itself, however, didn't change significantly.

It was in the USA — where there was a lack of servants — that the first transformations took place (Rybczynski, 2003: 162). Here, a group of women applyed the principles of Taylorism, developed in factories to increase productivity, to the domestic working space: the kitchen. Catharine Beecher, Ellen Richards and Christine Frederick researched, cronometrated, measured, analyzed, and developed prototypes. Beecher designed a kitchen to optimize the housewife's work and reduce the number of movements, by studying the height of countertops, movable surfaces, layout of drawers and containers. It priviledged comfort, hygiene, and lighting (Steel, 2013: 182-185; Espinet, 1984: 86-88). The *domestic engineers* developed principles that would become the design basis of 20th-century kitchens.

### 2.4 *20th century and contemporaneity*

The 19th-century domestic architecture and way of life persisted until the First World War, after which the social transformations, and lack of servants, forced the housewives to take charge of culinary chores. Suddenly, the kitchen became relevant.

Its transformation process was atypical: usually, changes occurred in the upper and mid-upper houses, and later adopted by lower classes. This time, the greater advances took place in post-War social housing — with studies on minimal spaces and Taylorist principles — and progressively moved upwards. Architects designed several kitchens, but the most relevant was the *Frankfurt Kitchen*, designed by the Austrian architect Margarete Schüte-Lihotzky, in 1926-27, for a set of social housing buildings by Ernst May (Espinet, 1984: 113). Due to its peculiar dimensions — 1.90 x 3.40 m — the kitchen came fully furnished, becoming the first *equipped kitchen* in History. It was designed according to the principles of rationalization and optimization, being extremely organized, well-lit and ventilated, with identified containers for ingredients, movable surfaces

and a central bench from which everything could be reached (Steel, 2013: 186-187).

The Modern Movement had also an important role in kitchen design, developing typified, optimized and homogenous spaces, with closed cabinets and countertops with standardized dimensions, usually taking the male body as reference (Steel, 2013: 188). This was a very different posture from the *domestic engineers*, to whom each person should find their own ideal kitchen organization. Also, while for the modernist architects appearing 'modern' was important, to them the emphasis was placed on good functioning (Rybczynski, 2003: 195).

After the Second World War, the USA's economy bloomed; consumption increased and the house — and the kitchen itself — progressively turned into a symbol of modernity and status (Zapata, 2002: 75). Companies rushed to present the latest trends, highlighting how much easier domestic chores — and being the *perfect housewife*, promoted by magazines and advertisements — would be with their new appliances (MoMA, 2010). This consumption boost had, evidently, a political and economical component, being an important part of USA's Cold War propaganda (Colomina, 2006: 54).

The kitchen, the space that had mainly been kept away from domestic social life, took now the central stage. It was the place where the family had meals, and guests were entertained. It was open to dining and living rooms, since smells and noises were now considered appealing. In the centre, cooking and entertaining, was the housewife.

Food, like the kitchen space itself, became more standardized. As food preparation moved from the kitchen to the factory, and alternatives emerged to the consumer's convenience — restaurants, take-aways, precooked meals — cooking food stopped being a *necessity*. Freed from the burden of hard work, cooking could reemerge as *leisure*, and acquire a character of self-expression (Rybczynski, 2003: 227). The cooking space reflects this, taking different sizes and configurations that fit the different consumer's expectations: from minimal kitchens (in a cabinet, column or modules) to big kitchens, fully equipped with the latest gadgets and appliances from trendy brands. They take different positions in the house, from secluded locations to being its focus, depending on personal preferences.

## 3 CONCLUSION

By following the general evolution of cooking spaces in different times, one could understand how their architectural position shifted within the house, mainly due to changes in the social hierarchy of its occupants. The further away they were from the family, the further away the kitchen was from the main social spaces. When the cooker belonged to the family, however, the space, too, took an important or even central position within the house.

Another connection may also be found between technological advances in the control of fire and the culinary preparations themselves. At times, it was the appetite for certain dishes that propelled technological advances in the control of fire and the organization of cooking spaces, like the roasted meat pushed the development of medieval chimneys. At other times, were the advances made in the kitchen — like the invention of the stove — that allowed the evolution of cuisine, as the more delicate French cuisine of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Today, however, we witness perhaps the biggest detachment in this relationship, with fully equipped kitchens being used solely to heat up a precooked meal. As argued, it is a matter of personal preferences, but we hope that the knowledge about this concomitant evolution, between house and food, might also propell a renewed connection with our dwelling spaces and how we inhabit them. Cooking is the activity that first gave meaning to the house. How can we have a meaningful home without it?

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