

## Making the Great Outdoors Better: the outdoor kitchen and the changing design of American luxury

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### ABSTRACT

*The credit-rich late-twentieth and early-twenty first centuries allowed for the rise of a broad spectrum of new consumer habits. In suburban America, homeowners realized their individual dreams and newly enabled profligate tastes in lavish professional and do-it-yourself (DIY) remodeling projects. Chief among their architectural and interior design modifications is the so-called 'outdoor kitchen,' installed in over a million American households and projected to become a stock feature of all upscale housing by 2015. In definition, it is an amorphous, wall-less room with individually determined dimensions, appliances and functionalities sited in what one owner-designer identifies as the previously underutilised space of the backyard. Currently free of restricting code or traditions, the outdoor kitchen is determined by and gives form to diverse but intersecting discourses of Do-It-Yourself home projects, home spas and meditative spaces, the yearning for resorts left unvisited in the wake of 9/11, changing gender relations, televised food programs that fuse celebrity and the act of cooking, the 'obesity epidemic' and the elevation of food itself from mere nutrition to a source of novelty and entertainment. Thus the outdoor kitchen is a new arena of socio-domestic performance, the built environment of the contemporary 'American Dream.'*

In the late-nineteenth century Manhattan, described in Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence*, social standing is measured - and generated - by the elaborate ceremony of the formal dinner. The 'heavy brown-stone palaces' of the New York elite are activated by the engraved invitation, hothouse gloxinias, expensive food prepared by hired chefs and distributed on fine china by professional servers. The animal necessity of eating is elevated into a grand choreography of manners and status that progresses in accordance with season and gender from reception hall to drawing-room, dining table, and various libraries and studies for cigars, gossip and flirtation.<sup>1</sup> The kitchen remained throughout the unseen mechanism at its core.

Today's domestic rituals find the kitchen not merely visible but moved into central focus. In 2003, the Builder's Choice national survey of homebuilders, contractors and architects revealed the kitchen featured in three of the top ten residential trends.<sup>2</sup> Boyce Thompson, editor of survey host *Builder* magazine, described the trends. The 'Family Kitchen,' trend number five, is 'where families entertain; it's where they spend quality time together. We're seeing more kitchens designed for activities' unrelated to food preparation such as homework, television viewing, and laundry folding. 'Wetrooms,' ranked eighth, mark a similar repurposing of residential space. These plumbed

adjuncts 'pop up all over the house' such that '[c]abinets, sinks, and mini-refrigerators are showing up in family rooms, master suites, libraries, and basements.'<sup>3</sup> As the household commissariat proliferates throughout the entire home, the assigned functionality of other rooms gives way as well. A *Time* cover story from 2002 notes the demise of the living room and concomitant emergence of the kitchen as symbolic center of both house and family.

The kitchen can't be contained anymore, so it blends into that large live-eat-play space often called a great room, which connects through glass doors to the outside space, now being treated as an integral part of the design. The idea is to allow family togetherness and personal space at the same time, meaning never having to reach a consensus about what to do together.<sup>4</sup>

The propensity of these 'live-eat-play' spaces to continue their sprawl outside is represented by Builder's Choice trend number four, the 'Great Outdoors.' This general category defines a broad array of features and 'inspired outdoor architecture' intended to facilitate 'great indoor/outdoor relationships.'<sup>5</sup> The concept is best described by a content Oceanside, California homeowner:

We bought this house [in 2001] when it was new and the backyard was a blank slate. With three-quarters of an acre, there was plenty of space to create a yard that had the feel of a nice resort with room to entertain outdoors but that still flowed together. [My husband] and I knew we wanted to cook and eat outdoors, so we built an outdoor kitchen with a barbecue, side burners, a rotisserie, a sink and a refrigerator. The kitchen also has a serving counter that can seat 15 on bar stools, though the yard can hold many more. ... From the bar area one can see both the pool and the outdoor living room... a cozy space with furniture that cost more than some of the furniture inside of the house, and a plasma television where the kids watch movies at night.<sup>6</sup>

This is the outdoor kitchen. (Figures 1 and 2) With over one million installed in American backyards, this wall-less room is

supplanting the barbeque of past suburban weekends with weather-resistant multiple gas-line fueled rotisseries, braziers and cooktops, stone-lined bread kilns, restaurant-quality refrigerators and beer coolers, plumbed sinks and dishwashers.<sup>7</sup> Calise, a leading supplier of outdoor appliances, promises to deliver 'The outdoor kitchen of your dreams' via a patented Modular™ Island System of stainless steel components that can be configured into '1.9 million possible ways.' Its website is couched in the rhetoric of individualization and self-empowerment, announcing 'This is the Calise® difference... Whether it's a do it yourself project, or assembled and finished by our Mod Squad™ it's fast, easy, and FUN for you to create the outdoor kitchen of your dreams.'<sup>8</sup> These modular combinations of infinite suppleness are arranged in accordance with interactive design and the unique tastes of individual designer-consumers.<sup>9</sup> Examples of relatively modest DIY projects include the 10x10-foot installation from Vermont ('a state known more for snowfall than for cookouts') featured in *Fine Cooking* (June/July 2007).<sup>10</sup> More elaborate versions incorporate built-in sound systems, high-definition televisions, and home theaters; a June 2007 newswire story reported on a 'retired Las Vegas businessman [who] spent \$200,000 on his backyard, reconfiguring the swimming pool and making room for bubbling fountains and a waterfall, a full kitchen with a 14-foot barbecue island, a slate and cement deck and a 37-inch plasma



Above  
Figure 1: The outdoor kitchen. Photo BDS Enterprises/Calise.



# Backyard Kitchen

What started as a simple built-in grill turned into a full-feature backyard kitchen for Gayle and Ken Riley of Stockton, California. It took first place for outdoor projects in the *Better Homes and Gardens*® Home Improvement Contest.

Rather than heating up their home by cooking indoors on warm summer evenings, Gayle and Ken escape to their breezy kitchen out back, where children Karina and Scott can join in on the fun. "This functions as a separate kitchen, so we don't need to be in and out of the house all the time," Gayle says.

A sink, three outlets for blenders and small appliances, and cabinets for dishes, spices, and snacks occupy the work-core side of the U-shape kitchen. The tile countertop is cantilevered so it can also serve as a bar-height eating area. 🏠

The kitchen is the heart of the home for the Riley family (above right), even if it's outside (right). A sliding window between the interior kitchen and its outdoor counterpart serves as a convenient pass-through (above left).



PHOTOGRAPHS: JAY GRAHAM, REGIONAL CONTRIBUTOR; HELEN HEITKAMP



## SPECIAL KITCHEN SECTION

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Figure 2: The Backyard Kitchen. "First Place for Outdoor Projects. *Better Homes and Gardens* Home Improvement Contest, August 2002." Originally published in *Better Homes and Gardens* (August 2002), 92. Permission of Meredith Corporation.

Figure 3: Troy Adams' outdoor kitchen as featured in *Bon Appétit*. Photo by Julius Shulman and Juergen Nogai originally published in *Bon Appétit* (April 2008), 148. Permission of Julius Shulman Photography.

television.' The man pronounced the result 'perfect for hosting outdoor dinner parties.'<sup>11</sup> Those new to the dream can find instruction in the network-sponsored HGTV KitchenDesign guide to these 'fully functional cooking areas perfect for entertaining your friends and family.' Regardless of their scope, these spaces now allow homeowners to perform the entire ritual of the social dinner, from initial greeting to cooking, serving, and entertaining.

The outdoor kitchen is poised to become a stock feature of upscale and luxury housing. In 2006, the National Association of Home Builders (NABH), a Washington, D.C.-based trade association whose 235,000+ members design, finance and construct an estimated 80% of all new American housing units, issued projections for the 'Home of the Future.'<sup>12</sup> NABH data indicate that by 2015, typical upscale single-family homes will have two stories and over 4,000 square feet, as well as outdoor 'rooms' outfitted with sinks, refrigerators, grills and cooking islands, all joined by fireplaces, televisions or audio equipment or both, and pools or home spas. In contrast, projections for the average home identify a two-story structure with 2,330 square feet, a one-story foyer, a 'parlor/retreat/library' and a single porch attached to the property front. Both classifications will have three-car garages, and 'kitchens and bathrooms will continue to be among the most important factors affecting consumer buying choices.' Kitchens in average homes will 'feature upgraded materials and appliances' but appear solely indoors.<sup>13</sup>

An exemplar of the type appeared in a *New York Times* (June 2007) real estate piece entitled, 'What You Get for...\$30 Million.' The article and accompanying photographs describe a lavish 11,500-square-foot property on five acres east of downtown Aspen. The property came with a separate one-bedroom guesthouse and a pond and was described, in part, as follows:

[It is] set against a hill with a landscaped stream running through the front yard. It has views of the Rocky Mountains and the North Star Preserve. This lodge-style house was built in 1981 and underwent a major renovation in 2000. It has rough-hewn posts and exposed ceiling beams

throughout. It is sold furnished with western-style furniture and appointments, including antler chandeliers and wrought-iron light fixtures. The property has eight full baths, three half baths, four fireplaces, a three-car attached garage, a media room, an exercise room, a hot tub and a sauna.<sup>14</sup>

For \$(US) 3,000,000, and \$(US) 28,000 in annual taxes thereafter, the future buyer would also receive an outdoor kitchen anchored by what appears to be a Weber Summit, introduced in 1995 as the first luxury gas grill (by way of comparison, the current top-end Summit S-670 has a 769-square-inch cooking area and 60,000 BTU-per-hour input).<sup>15</sup> The kitchen, like the house proper, rustic furniture and handmade home accessories included in the sale price, serves to fulfill rampant expectations generated by the exclusive Colorado mountain resort. To cook or to merely partake of items prepared in this particular kitchen, with its uninterrupted views of Rocky Mountain wilderness and fully realized Western-themed fantasia, is to experience the pure heart of the outdoor kitchen concept.

Balanced between early versions of the type and its *luxe* ideal is what may well be the mature form of the outdoor kitchen. Featured in *Bon Appétit* (April 2008) is veteran interior designer Troy Adams' own kitchen, created to 'capture an indoor-outdoor experience.'<sup>16</sup> The kitchen is a marvel. At 10-by-30 feet it is small for the type, and photographs make clear that it is a kitchen that becomes outdoors only when the recessed sliding doors constituting the house back wall are pulled open. Glass and stainless steel join red enameled lavastone, soapstone and bamboo on the interior; and rusticated slate tile and redwood on the exterior; partially sunken river rock demarcates where 'room' becomes simply yard. Appliances, some unexpected, do not appear *en suite* outdoors but remain largely in the house proper. Thus a custom tea bar nestles next to a filtered hot- and cold-water station, knife drawer, pantry, steam oven, microwave, and a washer and dryer. (The sole *al fresco* appliance is a low dining table outfitted with a gas firepit.) 'Instead of wallpapering the room with cabinets and appliances, as in a conventional fitted kitchen,' Adams explains, each element has 'its own presence, like separate pieces of furniture.'<sup>17</sup> Overall, it is

a triumph of the concept; one secured by photographs by no less than the great Julius Shulman, best known for his iconic images of the Case Study houses (Figure 3).

Adams' conceptual embrace of the new room engages longstanding discourses of efficiency and modernist functionality. His is an eminently practical 'indoor-outdoor experience' invoked through material, siting, and vantage points secured by work areas that face outward. The kitchen proper is effectively sealed against dirt, weather and wildlife when not in use.<sup>18</sup> Further, it adheres to credos of household efficiency that advise one to 'not make the kitchen any bigger than is actually required to contain the necessary conveniences,' and aligns with the 'Work Triangle' set forth in industrial designer Henry Dreyfuss' *The Measure of Man* (1959).<sup>19</sup> For Dreyfuss, proper kitchen design 'has a small triangle from refrigerator to sink to stove to refrigerator. The sum of this work triangle is under 23 feet. The triangle should not be interrupted by traffic flow.'<sup>20</sup> For Adams, 'each leg of the triangle should be at least four feet and no longer than nine.' He doubles the formula – increased size is apparently a critical aspect of the outdoor kitchen – to create two distinct triangular pathways anchored by a central chopping block. In a reflection of the organizing metaphors of the type, the designer allows the overly long dimensions require 'hiking across the kitchen for everything.'<sup>21</sup> In sum, the final result is a stylish update of what post-war developers of suburban housing marketed as 'California living.'

## WHAT TO MAKE OF THESE NEW ROOMS?

The multiple household iterations of the American kitchen are not without irony. Trends outlined by Builder's Choice arrive as the home kitchen as a whole is falling into disuse or being repurposed for various other family and communal activities. For example, by 2001 only 40.5% of American households were still cooking an average 'once a day,' and by 2004 29% of all meals were consumed in restaurants. Data vary but currently up to 75% of all non-restaurant meals and snacks, including that consumed in home, are in the form of pre-cooked, ready-to-eat and other forms of convenience

food and food products.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, the outdoor kitchen is not a response to contemporary cooking needs. Nor do outdoor kitchens, wetrooms and 'family kitchens' appear to satisfy certain broad expectations placed upon standardized designed domestic space, or the functions contained within it, since the early-twentieth century. Not the least of these is the linked commensal act of cooking and eating *en famille* that anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski placed against the satisfaction of mere animal appetite. He writes,

Some physical apparatus for eating is used, table manners observed, and the social conditions of the act carefully defined. It would be possible, indeed, to show that in every human society and as regards any individual in society the act of eating happens within a definite institution.... *It is always a fixed place, with an organization for the supply of food or its preparation, and for the opportunities of consuming it.* [emphasis added]<sup>23</sup>

The 'smooth working' of social and built apparatuses of food is 'as indispensable to the biological performance as the placing of food into the individual's mouth, mastication, salivation, swallowing, and digestion.'<sup>24</sup> In contrast, shelter magazine Domino celebrates flowing, decentralized home layouts for allowing the possibility, in the encouraging terms of a subheading, of 'Eating wherever, whenever.'<sup>25</sup> As itself one of these decentralized forms, the outdoor kitchen has a direct correspondence with the apparently deregulated eating that defines current American dietary habits, habits that justify converting backyard family playgrounds into extended dining rooms.

Here it is instructive to examine the truism that the built environment reflects and structures human behavior in both the public and private spheres. To depart from longstanding spatial divisions within a house is to alter or abandon the activities of private life previously secured by dedicated rooms, and vice versa. Senior design historian Penny Sparke attributes change in interior design to a dialectic of taste and efficiency, with the latter having 'the potential to homogenize taste and eliminate individuality and

difference.<sup>26</sup> In other words, change is driven by subjective desire, and falters when codified into a socially regulated form. This contradiction mars Watson Phillips' glorification of the modern kitchen in the form of idolized Victorian décor, and especially references the thrilling view of the stars through the chimney-piece and the 'mysterious 'safe' under the hill where kitchen is merged into the surrounding landscape in an anticipation of later outdoor rooms.<sup>27</sup> It is also inherent to Le Corbusier's foundational writing. 'Modern life demands and is waiting for a new kind of plan...for the house,' but at the same time this house, what Corbusier termed the *machine à habiter*, 'must be created in the spirit of living in mass-production houses.'<sup>28</sup> It is possible that counter-reaction for individualism drives today's initially oxymoronic migration of the residential core to the house exterior.<sup>29</sup> A means of engaging this ongoing mediation is offered by architectural theoretician Fred Scott, who notes that new forms are created 'in response to the needs, habits and desires of a particular age.' Scott writes,

The interventional designer is an agent of temporality, of change and of altering styles of inhabitation. Therefore, he or she needs to be fully conscious of such changes, and if possible ahead of their full expression. This is the business of the designer....The old adage of interior design - that it introduces new life into old buildings - seems to me to be a relevant description of the activity.<sup>30</sup>

An effective means of examining large-scale change in dedicated rooms is provided by eighteenth century France. Here, non-elite luxury and its built outgrowths of convenience and comfort first appeared in deliberate preparation for the coming industrial age. Voltaire, Diderot and other *philosophes* introduced and explained new patterns for a consumer-based national culture.<sup>31</sup> They played an important role in what historian Michael Kwass terms 'progressive consumptionism,' roughly the understanding that luxury consumption, 'far from being an evil,...was a social good.'<sup>32</sup> Glorification of 'material excess' inspired a dazzling array of new desires, attitudes and customs, which in turn inspired new designed spaces, each with its own name, assigned purpose,

and associated private and social behaviors. By 1800, the affluent French home was potential site of one of more than fifty different configurations of private space for ritualized attention to self alone.<sup>33</sup>

Kitchens acquired new functions and accessories as well. Food consumption was affected by the emerging era of consumer goods, economic growth and surplus. Historian Daniel Roche explains that 'people were told to adjust their diet to their circumstances.' The typical diet of eighteenth-century rural France was mostly crude bread, 'watery wine, cheese, vegetables, and perhaps a little meat,' and was similar to that of working-class Paris; this would remain roughly the case well into the nineteenth century. Wealthy and bourgeois Parisians, however, pursued a diet less aristocratic than gourmand, supplementing an existing 'wide range of items such as eggs, butter, cheese, sugar, coffee, wine, spirits, cider and beer' with fresh fruit, vegetables and herbs, quality domestic meat and dairy products marked with their site of origin, imported spices, chocolate, tea and other 'sophisticated, costly, and exotic ingredients.' Kitchens changed in direct response to heightened attention accorded to food and its preparation.<sup>34</sup> In 1715, 20% of a household inventory consisted of kitchen utensils in the form of iron frying pans, grills, tripods and cooking hooks, copper cauldrons and casseroles, and tin dishware. By 1780, the hearth had given way to the stove, the grill eclipsed by lighter stoneware and ceramic goods better suited to the elaborate preparations of pâté, fricassee, rissole and bouillon. Wealthier bourgeois homes sported a proliferation of 'egg cups, bowls, coffee makers, sugar bowls, and occasionally teapots' and other utensils for new foods and new techniques.<sup>35</sup> The kitchen thus constituted a collective fixed point that gave stability and meaning to new varieties of foodstuffs and cooking, as well as to the surrounding constellation of customs, durations, and newly essential accessories. That the most literal act of consumption took place within the private residence mitigated lingering religious and social inhibitions against material excess. As Voltaire explained, 'One can live with luxury in his house without ostentation, that is to say without adorning oneself in public with a revolting opulence.'<sup>36</sup>

The kitchen as a fixture of the twentieth century home is equally well-documented in works ranging from Maud C. Cooke's *Breakfast, Dinner, and Supper, or, What to Eat and How to Prepare It*, a late-nineteenth century manual of etiquette and hygienic food handling, to the theoretical explorations of Ellen Lupton's *The Kitchen, the Bathroom, and the Aesthetics of Waste* (1992).<sup>37</sup> In broad strokes, the rational household movement of the early 1900s displaced *fin-de-siècle* emphases on taste, morality and decoration, and professionalized the predominantly feminine control of production and consumption. Kitchens assumed a simplified spatial organization.<sup>38</sup> During the 1910s and into the Interwar period, Christine Frederick and Lillian Gilbreth promoted 'household engineering' and factory modes of efficiency as means of achieving enhanced productivity. Fredericks' 'New Housekeeping' essays of 1912 and *Household Engineering and Scientific Management in the Home* (1919) called for, in Sparke's summary, small, laboratory-like kitchens organized 'in such a way that walking between working surfaces, the cooker, the sink, the food storage, the utensil storage and the serving table, could be minimized,' and with all elements 'positioned according to the order of actions in the task involved.'<sup>39</sup>

The shift from the Victorian exercise of taste to scientific management is recorded in Richardson Wright's *Inside the House of Good Taste* (1915, 1918). Watson K. Phillips' chapter, 'The Modern Kitchen and Its Planning,' opens with an account of his grandmother's kitchen, a 'large, convenient room' made continuous with the dining room by removal of a partition. The essay glows with nostalgia recounting its already-outmoded cistern, wood box, red-painted cookie tins, and the 'serviceable white oil-cloth' covered table where he partook of the still-unrivaled pleasure of homemade buckwheat cakes with honey.<sup>40</sup> Phillips vacillates between boyhood sense-memory and keen enthusiasm for the precise and controlled space of the modern kitchen; 'turning from the old to the new reveals many changes,' he writes. The larger book explains that the kitchen alone escapes the general imperative that a house reflect its inhabitants' personalities. The 'living-room must be made for entertaining as well as for everyday life,' while bedrooms are where women especially could be

most freely expressive. The dining-room was the site of distinction and tradition, the dedicated environment for 'the high spot of the waking hours.' As the book explains, 'A good dinner works the daily miracle of a man's existence.'<sup>41</sup> Within this scheme, Watson describes a modern kitchen in conformance with guidelines for efficient and sanitary food preparation and, perhaps, the invisibility of domestic labor. The sink is to be porcelain and 'no less than 20 inches by 30 inches,' adjusted from the standard height of thirty inches to a subjectively 'comfortable level' to optimize its operation. Walls and ceilings are finished with smooth white paint or 'washable paper that can be renewed at slight expense,' and shelved cabinets ensure 'every necessary thing is at hand.' A clock shelf, preferably built in, is an 'inexpensive' and 'useful adjunct' to this well-regulated room.<sup>42</sup> A rigorous asepticism prompted both a 'double-acting door' and a pantry between kitchen and dining room that served to keep the sight, sounds and smells of cooking food from those awaiting their meals. The illusion of the 'daily miracle' was accomplished without fuss, and focus was kept on the social and familial rituals enacted within the homeowners' dining room.

Admiration for the scientific kitchen began to flag as early as 1929. 'The day of the white laboratory-like kitchen is past,' announced an Iowa State College Extension Service booklet on home management.<sup>43</sup> In its stead came aesthetic and code standards disseminated in exhibitions such as the 'Day after Tomorrow's Kitchen' (1944) that ushered in automated convenience perpetuated by the post-World War II housing boom. Inexpensive and rapidly made post-war suburban housing abandoned traditional layouts and introduced multipurpose hybrid rooms designed, in part, to keep construction costs low. The kitchen moved from the back of the house to become 'a U-shaped work space equipped with appliances and gadgets,' separated by a low counter from a living room that similarly assumed additional roles as study, dining room, parlor, and playroom. The kitchen remained efficient but was now startlingly visible and imbued with a new flexibility of purpose.<sup>44</sup> As such, it fit the progressive consumptionism of the postwar 1950s, an era of new and broadly based affluence. As in the earlier example of France, the altered kitchens of single-family

suburban homes fit correspondingly 'massive changes in American living patterns' and accommodated new domestic technologies, disposable products and packaged foods.<sup>45</sup>

## THE DREAMS OF 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY SUBURBIA

However varied its forms, luxury encoded as dream is at the very heart of American attitudes toward home ownership; indeed, dreams serve as the structuring metaphor for much of twentieth-century consumer desire. 'Every man has within him at least one house and one garden which, were he able to create them, would doubtless bring him Nirvana,' Richardson Wright explains in the foreword to *Inside the House of Good Taste*. 'It's his dream house and his dream garden, the sort of garden that he will make when he gets enough money... whatever the size or wherever the place, it will be his, his alone.'<sup>46</sup> It's a Nirvana realized by the post-war "'kitchen of tomorrow," the "dream kitchen," the "pace-setting kitchen," or the "miracle kitchen."<sup>47</sup> Manufacturers such as Calise rely on similar phrasing, and the NABH vision statement is to ensure 'All Americans have...the opportunity to realize the American dream of homeownership.'<sup>48</sup>

But the American Dream, like all others, can be analyzed. This was the goal of early motivation research into consumer response to the symbolic meanings of design. Post-war manufacturers used companies such as Social Research, Inc., founded 1946, to explore consumer values, behaviors, and choices and generally 'uncover the ways that design in mass-produced goods conveyed social assumptions that were widely understood.'<sup>49</sup> The operating conviction was that the intangibles of consumer psychology are as valid as more overtly tangible aspects of Modernist functionality. A variant maintains that the 'mundane movements and moments that comprise homemaking encompass a whole suite of entanglements between object, subject, agency and space. Objects and their acquisition, use, placement and value are thus mutually constituted, relationally governed by both production and consumption.'<sup>50</sup> Similar tactics can be used to explore key associations and contributing factors informing the outdoor kitchen.

One of the few consistent features of most outdoor kitchens is the cooking island. This plumbed and wired component anchors the installation and serves as its central focus while in use; recall the Oceanside example ringed with barstools. Attention directed to these islands coincides with the shift in consumer demand for unique dining experiences. A 1999 survey of open kitchens in restaurants, campus food courts, healthcare facilities and commercial venues found that up to 80% operated 'in full view of customers' to entice appetites and reinforce perceptions of freshness. The larger goal was visual entertainment; as the report concluded, 'Food is theater; the audience is seated and waiting, so bring on the chefs!'<sup>51</sup> Industry journals note the growing popularity of food as theater: 'Mongolian barbeques invite diners to select fresh food items while chefs prepare the meal on large flat grills; glass kitchens...permit patrons to view their meal being prepared over open fires and in brick ovens; and sushi and tepanyaki restaurants feature Japanese chefs showing off their skills.'<sup>52</sup> A. Elizabeth Sloan reports the privileging of visual and experiential stimuli over the meal itself, a phenomenon she awards the tongue-in-cheek title 'eatertainment.' Writing of diners who flock to the House of Blues, Dave and Buster's, and Elvis Presley's Memphis, themed restaurants pioneered by the Hardrock Café (opened 1971), Sloan notes, 'Table-side Internet access, comic books, and stock car racing themes are some of the latest permutations expanding the definition of eatertainment. All of these successful business ventures tap into a particular interest in the population.'<sup>53</sup> Restaurant designer Frederick Brush's summary is more succinct: 'Going to a restaurant is like attending a play.'<sup>54</sup> (The interior home counterpart is the 'display kitchen' modeled after those that regale restaurant diners with 'theater associated with the culinary arts.'<sup>55</sup>)

The structuring of display informs in less expected ways. Our current age has a ubiquitous flow of images and appropriable habits presented through the television and its technological sister, the Internet; see, for example, Food Network and the social networking site Foodbuzz.com and its 2,700 food-oriented blogs. Behavioral shifts modeled by scripted and reality network and especially cable shows have changed popular perceptions of cooking as a domestic

chore gendered feminine into acts of exciting, even exhilarating, creativity. Where Julia Child demystified *haute cuisine*, celebrity chefs Emeril Lagasse, Bobby Flay (host of 'Throwdown with Bobby Flay'), Mario Batali et al., are today adulated as heterosexual paradigms of culinary showmanship.<sup>56</sup> These men present an accessible model of cooking whose critical reconfiguration of masculine activity coincides with that of the outdoor kitchen. 'Culinarily, I try to be correct,' Emeril Lagasse stated in a 1998 interview. "'It's not like I'm bastardizing my craft... What I'm trying to do with the people is connect and say, hey, this isn't rocket science.'" (In the same article, *Food Arts* founder Michael Batterberry muses that the 'Essence of Emeril' show 'smacks a little bit of the wrestling ring or the roller derby.'<sup>57</sup> That Emeril's exuberant 'Bam!' became a late-1990s catchphrase is a measure of the far reach of these programs, and of their strong male personalities' demonstration of how to transform food preparation into a solid hour of entertainment.

One final example is the Sports Utility Vehicle (SUV), automotive correspondent of the outdoor kitchen. The Ford Explorer was America's most popular SUV from its launch in 1991 until the general loss of interest occasioned by surging gas prices in 2007. It features the same attention to massive size and over-designed elements and, in its early versions, ungainly assemblage as does a typical DIY outdoor kitchen. Initiated in 1986, the Explorer reflects findings of Archetype Discoveries, a psychological research company for automakers that investigated a baby-boom generation steeped in the era's taste for rugged Western wear, Ronald Reagan's folksy cowboy persona, and Hollywood blockbusters like *Top Gun*, *Rocky IV* and *Rambo First Blood, Part II*. The motivational research-like conclusion conveyed to the Ford light-truck team was 'Americans wanted automobiles that communicated ruggedness, individuality and an outdoor spirit.'<sup>58</sup> Not surprisingly, these findings are consistent with the pronounced masculinity of television cooks as well the concrete, stainless steel, unpolished stone, and roughly framed walls of shale and river rock preferred in outdoor kitchens. (While design of the indoor sort currently favors stone, especially granite, its appliances are conspicuously high-tech, and stainless steel appears less for its weatherproof properties than as a signifier of technology. The

escalating flood of obvious 'smart' technology in the house proper also contributes to the deliberate rustication of its exterior counterparts.)

Television and print advertisements crafted the image of Explorer drivers as perpetually at home in remote, mountainous locations, surrounded by naught but blank wilderness untouched by (other) human hands. It is interesting to note the very similar conclusion of artists' Komar and Melamid's well-known 'Most Wanted' series of 1994-1997. Their premise was that national surveys could yield an accurate gauge of contemporary tastes, and responses used to literally compose the most and least desired imagery within a given nation. In general outline, *America's Most Wanted* (1994) resembles a Hudson River School landscape with its soft blue sky, gently rolling hills, and placid lake with two wading deer. George Washington stands in the foreground, as does a small knot of three tourists in breezy summer clothes. The painting, SUV, and outdoor kitchen in toto arose at the same time, demonstrating the same love of domesticated wilderness, and, apparently, satisfying the same aesthetic and psychological desires.

## CONCLUSION

The outdoor kitchen is yet to have its Wharton emerge to make sense of it. The language used in describing it takes on shadings of Manifest Destiny, as in the do-it-yourselfer who describes setting his kitchen in the underutilized space of his back yard.<sup>59</sup> It is also infused with a sense of adventure and perhaps lawlessness as well, for outdoor trends largely skirt municipal codes over remodeling and new construction. There is no need for a range hood if the entire unit vents to open sky, and formal legal regulations and aesthetic guidelines governing these new spaces have yet to fully emerge. Indeed, it is precisely the lack of definition that accounts for the exhaustive itemization of kitchen-like features contained within each of these exterior quasi-rooms. Further, the early twenty first century kitchen is less the isolate and gendered workspace of prior eras than an increasingly demarcated open territory, the outdoor kitchen marking its ultimate migration from the house altogether. As a design trend, the outdoor

kitchen and parallel emergence of amorphous interconnected rooms signal both the continuation and dissolution of the modernist principals of good design. These spaces mark the upper limit of the open-plan layout that characterized post-war American homes and eliminated areas viewed as old-fashioned by prospective homeowners; however, they differ in privileging symbolic functionality over utilitarian or practical needs. Then, as now, these combined living and dining or, alternately, kitchen and dining spaces allowed for freshly imagined ideals of family togetherness.<sup>60</sup> The outdoor kitchen is appropriate for an era marked by real and virtual alienation, a fragmented room that responds to and gives pleasure to fragmented lives. It is the built environment of interactive design, the latest iteration of the 'American Dream.'

## NOTES

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