

The sexual science of the kitchen: representations of Australian domesticity

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Within the glossy publications of Australian interior design and architectural discourse, the house, the desirable one-off residence ostensibly committed to 'enduring style' predominates. Invariably these photographic essays include the kitchen, where 'smooth fronted, deep cupboards sequentially conceal everything from the stereo system to the espresso machine and toaster.'¹

These seamless ordered realms suggest the end of the kitchen as the central site of domesticity within the home and illustrate the chasm between everyday life and the projection of it through design media. If the practice of the everyday implies 'engagement with the real instead of fascination with the utopian abstract'² how does one interpret these influential models which seem to suppress with method and minimalism the messiness of occupation?

It could be argued the kitchen operates as a multi-layered space to learn about the microcosms and orders of life, and that this hypothesis enables us to examine attitudes to orthodoxy in residential architecture. In Australia, architects design very few houses, compared with the majority designed and built by the project home industry. This paper asks whether one of the reasons for this is because what is published as aspirational interior architecture tends to deny common expressions of domesticity. Nowhere is this more evident than in depictions of the kitchen. It will examine how the space and occupation of the kitchen demonstrate dichotomies between self-conscious order and habitational disorder. It sites the study within contemporary Australian culture, making comparisons with published kitchens, with regard to cultural identity, material culture, convention and creative processes. Since the study deals with a small selection of examples, it cannot be presumed as a general critique of the design profession. However it does suggest that for the professions of design and cooking, both of whom value practicality and functionality, there appear to be very different interpretations of those ideas into space and form.

What can be identified as contemporary Australian domestic orthodoxy – the stereotypical picture of a nuclear family in a federation townhouse on quarter acre block complete with timber veneered colonial kitchen and inset microwave oven, differs dramatically from both spatial and stylistic orthodoxy in current architectural representations. No matter what their form, domestic settings are tangible demonstrations of the everyday, and are important for what they offer as an understanding of assumptions about place making. 'Just as the phenomenological critique of modern science sought to avoid and correct heedless

abstraction and technicity by acknowledging everyday knowledge and life as the source from which theories are derived, so architectural theory seeks the everyday as a meta-level and the origin of all architectural intelligence.¹³ Furthermore, it can be argued that 'everyday life is not only a place of critical decoding but also the site of active dissent', and that these 'practices and habits of a "common culture" contain elements of subversion:...'4 'The everyday, however, is not a visual quality, but primarily a functional connection between human beings and their environment.'⁵

The paper examines how contemporary Australian architecture and interior design journals, in particular their depictions of the kitchen, continue to speak different languages of domesticity, and highlights the unhappy relationship between contemporary architecture and domesticity, a tension, which has been well examined in art and architectural theory. Christopher Reed in 'Not at Home' suggests domesticity provides an adversarial role, a Foucaultian 'point of resistance' in the history of modern architecture and design, perhaps best exemplified in Le Corbusier's tenet that 'the house is a machine for living in'. Reed argues that 'The domestic, perpetually invoked in order to be denied, remains throughout the course of modernism a crucial site of anxiety and subversion'.⁶ The notion of domesticity itself has been similarly scrutinised, by cultural, architectural and feminist historians including Benjamin, Rybczynski and Sparke.⁷ However even if one takes as given that domesticity is a fabrication and 'specifically modern phenomenon'⁸ the fact remains that it is a willingly held and shared cultural complicity with recurrent characteristics or conventions.

The kitchen is demonstrably the pre-eminent site of domesticity within the home. De Certeau has analysed it as a place of learning for both the infant and the adult, and asserts that 'through the impenetrable game of food behaviours and their miniscule variations from person to person, histories (cultural, social and familial) and memories superimpose themselves [inspiring] habits, customs and preferences, tributaries of mentalities and sensibilities.'⁹

Given that the kitchen provides a rich field for discussion of cultural customs, how are these interpreted in Australian kitchens? Orthodox readings of the kitchen often present it metaphorically as a place of tradition, the hearth and heart of the home. Etymological connections (fuoco=fire=focus/hearth/centre) fuel the notion that the kitchen is a place of active material and social realisation, where in Levi Strauss' terms, nature and culture are transformed from raw to cooked.¹⁰ It functions on both personal and familial scales, and in broader and cross-cultural readings, as a repository of recipes, rituals and received knowledge *regardless of regional vicissitudes, it represents a site where the local and global collide in patterns and processes of organisation and production.*



*Figure 1: No matter what their form, domestic settings are tangible demonstrations of the everyday.
Photography: Authors*



*Figure 2: The space and occupation of the kitchen demonstrate dichotomies between self-conscious order and habitational disorder.
Photography: Authors*

While the politics of home are undeniably altering and the mechanisms of production and supply are subject to rapid global change, how profound is this in terms of spatial occupation? Futuristic speculations about the effect of technological advances and familial changes on the home predict we may be moving towards kitchenless houses, or at least ones where the kitchen becomes more of an assembly bench for externally produced and sourced value added dishes.

If we examine a range of contemporary Australian kitchens we can see some preoccupations clearly in the designs: the centrality of the kitchen within the rest of the house; a visual and physical connection with the outside; a sense of a prescriptive and ordered sequence of activities to be accommodated; the pre-eminent role of the cook. These are no different from characteristics in most conventional kitchens. These aspects then could be considered to define the orthodox or quintessential spatial qualities and elements of a kitchen environment. If kitchens conform to a similar typology, why then, within the context of the rest of the house, is it the subject of so much self-conscious effort and expression of stylistic variation? Consider the plethora of magazines and lifestyle television programmes devoted purely to the kitchen and its 'décor'. Certainly stylistic differences suggest varying attitudes about the occupation of these places, from the functional to the dysfunctional.

Selecting one example, a lavishly illustrated article in the collectors' edition 2000 of Australian Belle magazine features a 'lean silver box' of a kitchen, where 'smooth fronted, deep cupboards sequentially conceal everything from the stereo system to the espresso machine and toaster'.¹¹ The travertine bench top and matching 3.6 metre dining table stoically resist any sign of interaction and habitation. And this is no aberration, for many contemporary design magazines depict equally ambiguous spaces where with unnerving regularity, one finds the ubiquitous bowl of fruit, disingenuously placed by the stylist. A recurring characteristic is a theatrical, almost sacred quality to the space where the altar could be the sink or the cook-top, and a table, which becomes a stage for performing food, lacking only a proscenium arch. Images of enigmatic kitchens like this and our own observations of design practice and education, and, candidly, the reality of daily family life as we know it led us to examine differences in published interior/architecturally designed kitchens. From a range of kitchens researched we have selected two, which could be considered influential because they have been widely published. These are examined in detail to identify and describe pervading characteristics and are the pilot case studies for a larger research project to be carried out nationally in late 2002. The second part of the paper is an overview of contemporary kitchen design as published in design journals, and a discussion of how prevalent these characteristics would seem to be.

The first two kitchen studies are designed and owned by a prominent Australian designer, one an inner city apartment, the other a holiday home. It is almost impossible to make a distinction between the two, a curious observation given that the designer sees them as totally different in approach. “One of the reasons for having a weekender”, the designer has said, “is that you habitate a place that is totally different to urbanity.(sic)”¹² In relation to the rest of the house each kitchen operates as an extension of the main salon. ‘The kitchen is designed to look like a non-kitchen, in the sense of a separate room.’ It is conceived as part of the general living area, where events happen, rather than a separately housed activity. Paradoxically, the designer suggests, cooking assumes a more important and attenuated part of the day’s activities, particularly for the beach environment where the designer states, ‘the whole day is about the meal.’¹³

Both kitchens receive light and aspect from panoramic floor to ceiling glazing, either opposite the main workspace or adjacent to it. The views in each case are spectacular and uninterrupted by close range elements. They invite contemplation away from the immediacy of the kitchen tasks, neither offering a genuine engagement, social or functional with the outside.

The cook is positioned centrally, anchored by a highly defined and compact work triangle, between appliances, which are concealed behind seamlessly detailed fittings. The cook assumes the stance of a performer, separated from the ‘audience diners’ by a dominant bench, which conceals storage and apparatus behind its unadorned highly polished surfaces. In each kitchen the cook is framed by impressive phallic elements – two massive, gleaming exhaust ducts and an oversized tap.

The benches in both kitchens constitute also the main dining tables; the designer speaks of the ‘Big Table’ and Japanese Tepanyaki cooking methods as formative in the approach to the design of all the designer’s kitchens. This spatial model is remarkably similar in typology to the farmhouse kitchen, where the table operates as the primary focus and preparation area. However given the designer’s reductionist approach it is not surprising that the designer choses to draw parallels with the minimalism of Japanese design rather than with the vernacular. The city kitchen also has a small round table to one side, which seats four in his preferred non-hierarchical arrangement. This invites comparison with the traditional patriarchal rectangular dining table. Gastronomic writer, Margaret Visser states that the preference for small round tables emerged from the habits of seventeenth and eighteenth century aristocrats who increasingly ate together in small groups. ‘It is easy- and so very modern- to be egalitarian once the lower orders have been placed in a totally different

sphere, out of sight and out of mind, and certainly not invited to one's table.¹⁴ Aspects of this appear to be operating in these elite, childless environments, one secure, the other secluded.

The style and disposition of the kitchen are direct consequences of the nature of the designer's practice, which is generally corporate, luxurious and exclusive. All of the finishes and appliances are expensive, pristine, and high maintenance, and there are no everyday objects on display. Those objects that are on display are signature design pieces, the Alessi bowl, the Aalto vases and the Stelton coffee set, which are the only manifestation of the designer's personal history or taste, none of which show any signs of age. This untouched and photographic quality suggests a denial to the reality of everyday life, a resistance to signs of wear and tear; complexity and disorder.

The disposition and stylistic characteristics of these two kitchens can be seen repeatedly in the images of the architectural media; the kitchen as living realm not room, the kitchen as theatre, dominant horizontality, intense high contrast lighting, pristine reflective bench tops, highly polished exhaust hoods, the table foregrounded and expensively finished, self-conscious displays of objet d'art and ethnographica and ingeniously concealed appliances. These hegemonies are accessorised with their own hyperbolic language, '...an essay in romantic minimalism', 'an arresting piece of sculpture', 'an intriguing architectural composition', 'an elegant and airy foil to the chaotic, claustrophobic, patchwork surrounds' or, in proudly oblivious irony 'at first glance this hardly seems like a kitchen at all, so well have its functional elements been concealed.' The kitchens are commended for those things they 'all have in common: sleek surfaces, complementary appliances, and a commitment to enduring style.'¹⁵

Aside from the dearth of signs of occupation in these images – an habitual characteristic of architectural photography – there are no references to the genesis of the kitchen as a feminine alchemic workplace, a room to exercise ones 'fashion and style as markers both of social positioning and of individual identity'¹⁶ where all the implements and ingredients were on display and at hand. It would appear the architectural profession is presenting these genderless sanitary environments as the preferred model of domesticity, despite Australia's emerging architectural identity espousing strong connections to ideas of place, expressionism and craft. However, it would be misleading to suggest that all the images of contemporary architectural kitchens are of this nature. There are examples of kitchens where the 'clutter' (a highly pejorative term in architectural magazines) of utensils and occupation is acceptable, even welcome and where the identities and interests of the occupants are evident. Yet by

far the majority of depictions present spaces, which are without a sense of familial comfort and daily interaction. Whether this is the work of the interior architect, architect, client or magazine stylist is open to debate.

Spatially the kitchens perpetuate the basic typologies of u-shaped, l-shaped, the linear galley arrangement or minor variations of these. The presence of the (farmhouse) table is now more usually a fixed island bench, which fulfils both storage, preparation and sitting functions, but denies the ability to eat at a table of ergonomic height, in chairs which face one another. The other recurring characteristic, which both continues and redefines conventional kitchen design, is the attitude to storage. Traditionally all meals of the day were prepared and consumed at home, from an ample larder well stocked with perishables and preserves. The sociological and cultural shift toward dining out, sourcing fresh or pre prepared foodstuffs daily and instantaneous preparation methods has altered the need for an spacious kitchen with copious room storage.¹⁷ Eating habits have been subject to similar changes, with many meals consumed peripatetically.¹⁸ Under these influences, the kitchen no longer operates in the same way, and as a consequence is undergoing transformations removed from familial and functional precedents.

Order and disorder are germane states in both architecture and food. The desire to bring order out of disorder is common to both. One assembles ideas into plans, documentation, then built form. The other takes a recipe, raw ingredients and processes to produce a dish. These paired states have two possible applications/ interpretations to this discussion of kitchens. The first relates to the phenomenological observation that home is a definitive 'other' to the public and civic realm and as such allows a natural habitational disorder that is anathema to the ordered and structured systems that society puts in place elsewhere. Lefebvre describes this as the 'irreducible remainder' – that which is left over when the structuring activities of science, technology, social administration, the consumer good, and the mass media have colonised, defined and regulated everyday life and experience.¹⁹ It is this 'otherness' that Bordo is referring to when she writes, 'But a house is only truly safe and idealizable when the people who inhabit it live in a context of the outside world...the outside as viewed from within the protected lair. Then home is imagined as a safe harbour where one will calm down, reconstitute, regain composure, remember and therefore potentially re-experience oneself as a competent entity travelling through space.'²⁰

The disciplined kitchens of the glossy journals are not only made deliberately homogenous with their surrounding spaces but deploy corporate and commercial aesthetic in their design so that for their occupants the translation from workplace to home must be almost

indistinguishable. In other cases they evoke the minimalist pure space of the art gallery. The argument could be made that for some, this approach allows a mental liberation within the complexities of everyday life and domesticity rather than a denial of it.

The second observation is that within the kitchen, a controlled visual and spatial sense of order may actually belie functional rationality. While the classic work triangle of stove/sink/fridge is incorporated with considered precision, the inherent burden imposed by concealing everything (except the bowl of fruit) is obviously accepted without question.

The metaphor of how the fruit is placed or offered for (non) consumption indicates that in both of these kitchens the balance between order and disorder is a tense one. The temporal fragility of fruit serves as a poignant reminder that the kitchen is a place of regenerative humanity, social and physically restoring, even if the meal is locally sourced, globally inspired genetically modified take-away. The various pressures on the domestic realm from the last century, technological, demographic and political, appear to have had less impact on spatial patterns and disposition, which retain the orthodoxy of post industrial domestic arrangements, but translated into an aesthetic dominated by surface and skin, a workplace which almost perversely denies its corporeal origins and occupation.

So what might these prevailing pristine representations of hearthless homes mean? The sanitising legacies of modernism while being questioned elsewhere in architectural discourse appear to persist in the depictions of domesticity if not in the rhetoric that generates many of these examples. In these kitchens 'modern life is represented as "artificial" imposing itself on the "natural" rhythms and process of the human body.²² "Civilisation" becomes a retreat from authenticity, a false patina over the "real" self and body.' If we extend the analogy it is a little like making a dish never to be eaten. 'Like nouvelle cuisine, it's trying to look pretty on the plate without satisfying the stomach.'²³

End notes

- ¹ R. De Lisle, 'Rus in Urbe,' *Belle Collectors Edition*, 156 (December – January 2000): pp. 154–159.
- ² K.B. Jones, 'Book review: Architecture of the Everyday,' *Journal of Architectural Education*, 53,2 (November 1999): p. 123.
- ³ G. Confurius, 'The Everyday: Editorial', *Daidalos*, 75 (May 2000): p. 5.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Frank-Bertolt Raith, 'Everyday Architecture: in what style should we build?', *Daidalos*, 75 (May 2000): 9.
- ⁶ C. Reed, 'Introduction' in Christopher Reed (ed), *Not at Home*, 1996, p. 16.
- ⁷ Refer in particular to Walter Benjamin, 'Erfahrung and Armut' [Experience and Poverty], *Gesammelte Schriften* vol.2 pt.1, Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, (eds.), Frankfurt Am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag 1977, Witold Rybczynski, *Home: a short history of an idea*, New York: Viking Penguin, 1986 and P. Sparke, *As Long As It's Pink*, Harper Collins, 1995.
- ⁸ C. Reed, *Not at Home*, p. 7.
- ⁹ M. de Certeau et al, *The Practice of Everyday Life vol 2, Living and Cooking*, Timothy J. Tomasik (trans.), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998: p. 186.
- ¹⁰ C. Levi-Strauss, *Introduction to a Science of Mythology vol 1, The Raw and the Cooked*, John and Doreen Weightman (trans.), London: Jonathan Cape, 1970.
- ¹¹ De Lisle, 'Rus in Urbe,' p. 159.
- ¹² 'Full Exposure', *Australian Style*, Jacqueline Khiu (ed), 42 (August 2000):60
- ¹³ Authors' interview with Nik Karalis, Melbourne, September 2000.
- ¹⁴ M. Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner*, London: Penguin, 1993, p. 122.
- ¹⁵ A selection of quotes from *Houses*, 24 (2001).
- ¹⁶ Sparke, *As Long As It's Pink*, p. 214.
- ¹⁷ See D. Lupton, *Food, the Body and the Self*, London: Sage Publications, 1996, p. 92. for a discussion on the sociology of highly processed food. She quotes extensively from Morse, 'What do cyborgs eat : oral logic in an information society', *Discourse*, 16, 3, (1994) 108. 'In its elevation of function over pleasure 'non-food'...suggests the ability to transcend the body's needs for sensual gratification, privileging mind over matter in an extreme extension of the Cartesian duality.'
- ¹⁸ Lupton, *Food the Body and the Self*, p. 38. '...concern is often expressed in both public and private forums about the prevalence of take-away foods and the tendency for family members to eat meals at different times or to eat the evening meal in front of the television. These practices, it is argued, do not allow children to develop the social skills and table manners appropriate for 'civilized' eating behaviour, and also detract away from the cohesion of the family.'
- ¹⁹ Confurius, 'The Everyday: Editorial', p. 5.
- ²⁰ Bordo et al, 'Missing Kitchens', p. 75.
- ²¹ S. Drake, 'The Architectural Antimephitic' *On What Ground(s)*, SAHANZ conference proceedings, Adelaide: 1997:208–214.
- ²² Lupton, *Food the Body and the Self*, p. 86.
- ²³ Ibid, p. 86.