Becoming Modern: One Hundred Kitchens and a Cellar or Two

Figure 1. Modern built-in cabinetry in Wayne County, New York. (Dept. of Home Economics and Management Extension Records, #23-18-919, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library)

‘Miss Clara Jonas’ cupboards in her apartment, closed. Cans painted to harmonize with linoleum.’

1 Hand-written caption for images from Wayne County, New York. Dept. of Home Economics and Management Extension Records, #23-18-919, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, NY.

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Figure 2. The same cabinet shown open to illustrate improved organization and design. (Dept. of Home Economics and Management extension records, #23-18-919, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library)

‘Miss Jonas’ kitchen- cupboards open. Files for pans at top of base cupboard so it is unnecessary to stoop to reach them. Racks on cupboard doors for glasses, plates, spices, etc. Measuring spoons and cups hung on door. Narrow shelves made to fit dishes eliminate wasted space in cupboards. Handles of cups placed for easy grasp for right handed person.’

My interest in the notions of evolving and developing as applied to interiors centers on the design of everyday interior spaces themselves. In particular, I am interested in processes of improvement and how they have been employed throughout design history as a means of redefining the ways in which space is inhabited and interpreted. This study, which is based on a content analysis of an extensive unpublished photographic collection of renovated and unimproved mid-twentieth century rural and small-town American kitchens, will address how the notion of ‘becoming’ can activate perceptions of design identity, and in particular, the identity of being modern. The meaning and effectiveness of the

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2 Hand-written caption information images from Wayne County, New York. Dept. of Home Economics and Management extension records, #23-18-919, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library)
use of photographs as the medium for conveying the transitional nature of the images portrayed will be considered.

The influence of the Extension Service

In the poor and middle-income rural households of Depression Era America (1930s-1940s), American women routinely sought help from domestic design experts on the staffs of large public universities found across the United States. These educated researchers provided practical advice for how to make home improvements with much of their focus placed on the kitchen. With the establishment of the ‘Extension Program’ as part of Federal legislation known as the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, large state-sponsored educational institutions developed multiple means for reaching out to the populace of their respective regions in practical academic areas such as engineering, agricultural development and home economics. Universities developed programs for presenting their findings to the public in a manner that encouraged the use of new methods for improving such things as family health and child-care strategies; for promoting the expansion of water sources and the power grid into less populated areas; and for supporting the integration of new, efficient and progressive processes for domestic work and all aspects of farming.

The activities of extension experts took many forms. Researchers published their recommendations in small booklets and bulletins that were provided at no cost to subscribers and they spoke on the radio about their findings. They hosted groups for short courses and special events held on college campuses. They went into ‘the field’ to conduct demonstrations of new techniques and best practices for rural groups such ‘The Grange’ and the ‘Home Bureau.’ Experts even made house calls to individual properties so that problems could be analyzed and customized solutions could be rendered.

Several large Midwestern and Southern universities in the U.S. became leaders in the development of broad-ranging strategies for sharing extension information along with Eastern schools such as Cornell University in New York State. It is the activity of design reformers at Cornell that forms the basis for this research. First in the provision of published ‘Reading Courses’ for farmer’s wives and broad-reaching in their attempts to encourage the modernization of rural houses, Cornell’s experts engaged the public at every level including making personal home visits to encourage women and their neighbours to evaluate their living conditions and the resources they found at hand using techniques such as sketching, photo-

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documentation and analysis. These experts, in collaboration with their ‘clients’ and their friends and neighbours, identified potential possible improvements to spaces and they empowered groups of friends and neighbours to get involved in the planning and execution of the necessary remodelling. All in all, between 1930 and 1935, nearly 1,500 such ‘conferences’ were held in the kitchens of upstate New York.

**Kitchen and its image**

Files filled with photographs of kitchens, laundry rooms, and cellars from a range of rural locations in New York now reside in the “Rare and Manuscript Collection” of Cornell University’s Library system. These by-products of research conducted in the 1930s and 1940s show the outcomes of these evaluations and the remodeling activities they spawned as a part of residents’ efforts to create more modern living environments for themselves and their families. The collection is comprised of a combination of amateur snapshots and professionally-taken photographs. Most are labelled with information that identifies the general geographic location of the room depicted as well as the family name of the kitchen’s occupants. A brief description of what the photograph is intended to portray is also often included in the caption.

The photographic collection contains more than one hundred images of domestic spaces from the 1930s and 1940s, many of which served as illustrations in published extension bulletins and as demonstration and display materials shown at events such as fairs and meetings. Most are kitchen views—often framed to highlight the reconfiguration of the internal workings of cabinetry and the incorporation of modern systems such as plumbing and electricity. The photographs express a sense of habitation and use by showing the shelves of cupboards fully stocked, their doors open wide and drawers hanging out to reveal the order and rigidity of their organization. As the kitchen photos in Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate, the location of goods inside of cabinets required careful planning based on frequency of use and convenience of handling while the composition of the cabinet’s contents relied on regimented principles such as the alignment of similarly-sized objects, the graduation of sets of goods that diminish in size, and the positioning of small, easily lost items on racks and hooks that make their location apparent. The use of shallow, closely-spaced shelves for small goods such as coffee cups and small bowls negated the possibility of goods being buried in unwieldy stacks or behind larger items in the cabinet.

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While some of the photographs focus on the design of individual storage units, others feature broader views of rooms. The kitchens shown range from conglomerations of older furnishings and cabinets that have been modified to meet modern standards for height and position to rooms that have been completely re-fit with a system of newly constructed built-in cabinetry and new appliances. In the kitchen seen in Figure 3, furnishings that predate the kitchen’s “modernization” have been raised up on simple wood blocks to align cabinets with the height of the sink and to support a more ergonomically comfortable posture for persons doing kitchen work. Often the internal workings of units such as those seen here have been reconfigured to allow for greater capacity and organization of contents. Scrap lumber gathered from unused wooden crates were recommended for this purpose. Hooks and racks were devised for the underside of upper cabinets and the insides of cabinet doors to increase capacity and the accessibility of frequently used items. The use of visual devices such as the application of a consistent paint colour—nearly always white enamel paint—helped to visually connect the disparate elements and to increase the uniformity, hygiene and durability of the domestic work space. Likewise, manufactured surface materials such as sheets of linoleum gravitate from floors to walls and counter tops in some of the images, demonstrating an effort to increase the durability and washability of work surfaces.

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The state of these rooms as models of modernity is not always apparent at first glance, in part because they contrast strongly with the bright and polished modern interiors so often seen in the shelter magazines and builders’ journals of the same era. Alongside articles that described how new kitchens should be laid out and fitted with ‘continuous’ manufactured cabinetry, magazines such as Better Homes and Gardens and House Beautiful also featured full colour illustrations of kitchens in the advertisements for products such as Armstrong linoleum and Westinghouse appliances, showing off the impact of the cheerful shiny surfaces of the seemingly new spaces shown. By contrast, the kitchens captured in the extension photographs often contain a mixture of furnishings and there is a strong reliance on the reuse of extant cabinetry as well as a predilection toward do-it-yourself carpentry for making the alterations deemed necessary to achieve improvement. The presence of personal belongings—dishes and cookware, table linens and silverware, mops and scrub buckets, a shopping list, stacks of letters, shelves of cookbooks or the occasional daily newspaper such as the one seen in Figure 4—lends authenticity to the imagery while reinforcing its ability to invite viewers to imagine themselves in the spaces.

The kitchens portrayed in the photograph collection vary in size and not all appear to have been completely renovated. Some remodelled spaces rely solely on the reinvention of existing furnishings and crudely constructed cabinetry—a shelving unit constructed out of wood salvaged from fruit crates or, as seen in Figure 4, a piece of low cabinet furniture was actually turned upside down and set on a separate table to create more useful raised storage for dishes and glassware. Evidence of wear and tear can also be seen in the photos of the rooms—on floors and the surfaces of walls and countertops. Low-cost materials like roller blinds were sometimes employed as coverings for shelves in lieu of more permanent doors.


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Despite their sometimes eclectic appearance, an almost celebratory display of modern technologies and devices can sometimes also be seen in the photographs. These include displays of taps, pumps and plumbing pipes for supply and waste disposal, electric light fixtures and small appliances such as mixers on stands, clocks and timers, as well as communication devices such as telephones and radios. In non-kitchen spaces, enormous electric vacuum cleaners are tucked into closets alongside manual cleaning supplies and electric washers sit proudly in the center of otherwise unfinished subterranean laundry areas.

Most of the photographs of cellar spaces emphasize the development of large pantry spaces that use the same organizational strategies seen in the kitchen cabinetry. Hand-made shelves supply space to accommodate jars, cans, crocks and jugs of goods intended for more long-term storage. Attempts to create a hygienic setting in the often crude, dark and damp cellars can be seen in the use of newspaper to line the shelves, curtains that could have been drawn across the front of shelving units to discourage the accumulation of dust, and attempts to keep everything elevated from the floor surface using pallets and wall-mounted shelves. Organization is maintained by grouping similar goods together and using

Figure 4. ‘Rochester City, Home of Mr. and Mrs. Henry De Jager. Inverted washstand is used for storage of everyday dishes formerly kept in a cold pantry. May, 1940.’ (Dept. of Home Economics and Management extension records, #23-18-919, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library)
large labels to identify each container’s contents. In places like New York, these cooler-than-normal spaces because critical areas to preserve garden and orchard produce such as apples, potatoes and onions throughout the winter season.

Figure 4. “Canned food storage center in basement of home of Mrs. Amelia Steria, Lowville, NY” (Dept. of Home Economics and Management extension records, #23-18-919, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library)

Photographs as modern messengers

While sketches and narrative descriptions of design recommendations can be seen as modes of communicating design ideas in the extension literature of the 1930s, it seems significant that the photograph became the preferred mode of recording and communicating the experts’ design recommendations. As a relatively new, mechanized, and therefore modern mode of communication in the pre-WWII era, photography was well-suited to conveying the ‘realistic’ aspects of the settings portrayed and destined for use in further research and teaching. While the ‘perfection’ of modern kitchens fitted with new continuous manufactured cabinetry reigned as the ideal in popular culture in the 1930s, the potency of these photographic images is their ability to be understood as representations of real rooms that have been caught in a state of transition between old and new that is worthy of consideration. Barbara Savedoff notes that ‘though the photograph may be understood as, at least in part, a construction of the photographer, and as itself transformative of the objects it presents, it may
never the less irresistibly be seen as presenting us with a record of fact.’7 Using images that were recognizable as the real kitchens of real people to illustrate their messages instead of the more ideal model settings created on university campuses for the study of kitchen efficiency and equipment lent the experts further creditability.

The portability of the camera made it possible for it to be easily transported to distant places. Extension experts could only use their Baby Brownie cameras with marginal results for interior photography but professionals’ cameras were well suited to secure crisp clear black and white interior images. As a modern tool for the modern researcher, the presence of a camera in the process of documenting the kitchens inevitably helped imply the design expert’s influence on her subjects, inherently granting her further authority by enabling her to ‘take’ pictures or ‘capture’ images as part of the process of guiding her clients to credible solutions to their design problems.8

This is not to say that the occupants of the spaces shown in the photographs sat back passively to receive the extension experts’ advice, however. The process encouraged was constructive, democratic and participatory, and experts encouraged residents to try to solve their own problems using the research provided as a basis for defining the road to improvement. The photographs recorded and saved the evidence of the merits of certain standards and approaches and these then became tools for teaching other women about modernization techniques. Theories of photography suggest that as a medium, it has the ability to be understood as more than a mere means of representing imagery, and I suggest that this collection is further evidence of the credibility of the position that photographs can capture and express the shifting nature of the spaces depicted, read through the lens of interpretation. Despite photography’s association with realism, John Tagg encourages a useful understanding of the photograph as a form of diagram; one that ‘produces a new kind of reality, a new model of truth.’9 Jae Emmerling further enumerates Tagg’s notion of the photograph-diagram as a type of image that ‘traces a becoming, a multiplicity; it entrains history by folding and refolding it, by conjugating it with life…’10 It is proposed, then, that this photographic collection of kitchens and associated domestic storage spaces depict a process as much as product to the extent that the movement toward a modern lifestyle is present in visual elements such as visible electric mixers, plugged in and ready for use. It can be seen in the perfect alignment of cup handles on a shelf, where no placement has been left to random chance. It can even be felt in the images portraying cabinet doors hanging open and the

drawers ajar; the expression of an innate human desire to anonymously put themselves on display through their personal goods.

**Becoming modern**

From the perspective of everyday design, what did it actually mean to become ‘modern’ in the 1930s and 1940s? Design historian Penny Sparke points out that attitudes at the time were influenced by dual perspectives from architects and designers who promoted the interdependence of structure and built-in furniture, which many considered a form of ‘equipment,’ and decorators who encouraged people (mostly women) to see the domestic environment as an extension of themselves and their personalities. For the women whose kitchens benefitted from the advice of Cornell’s experts, their kitchens served as repositories of modernity in both capacities. The scientific approach adopted by researchers who empirically measured the footsteps required to complete cooking tasks and the heights that typical women could comfortably reach into their cupboards for their tools and supplies reinforced the perception of the kitchen as a laboratory or workspace and efficiency became a most-prized value in terms of the design criteria applied to remodelling schemes. At the same time, a palpable sense of the occupant/designer’s self-confidence and pride in their interior can be perceived in the images made of the improved but still humble kitchen and cellar spaces through the near-obsessive sense of order revealed in the disciplined and controlled approach taken to the storage of goods. This obsessiveness was often tampered, however, by the beautifying touches of a small bouquet of flowers set on a window sill, the coordination of a linoleum pattern on a countertop with a shiny new surface on a floor, or even the display of a collection of bananas and an exotic fresh pineapple artfully arranged atop a kitchen counter.

These kitchens are important precisely because they are ‘becoming’ modern rather than being expressed as finished products. As such, they are evidence of progress, improvement and effort. They exhibit the qualities of trying to meet a standard as it was established by authorities (extension experts), all-the-while reminding viewers of their transitional state through their imperfection and human occupation. By documenting views that portray the contrast between the intervention and the existing conditions, it became possible for experts to highlight the potential of certain approaches to improvement. By including signs of use in the images, the sense of actual occupation is heightened and the ability of viewers to imagine themselves in the spaces is encouraged, creating a connection with potential clients and establishing a common ground that aided in the promotion of change. By including signs that the rooms that have been documented are actually ‘lived in,’ the ideas gain credibility and accessibility. By demonstrating the malleability of goods, materials, and configurations, the viability of transformation is demonstrated. Finally, by providing evidence of the role of economy in the approach to designing modern environments, homeowners were discouraged from viewing the process as one of mere consumption and accumulation.

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The images of kitchens in transition are more potent than the finished/sanitized/fictionalized imagery used by manufacturers to promote the purchase of new products because they are clearly rooted in everyday life. Yes, the photographs may have been staged to a certain extent, but they are still images of spaces in situ and are recognizable as such. And as such, they have an authenticity that the mediated images of magazine articles and advertisements often lack. The design reformers in extension programs such as the one at Cornell University understood this. Modernity, for them, became more than just a product. They also understood it to be the activity necessitated by efforts to transform the environment and attitudes about who could and should be empowered to affect that change. The images in Cornell’s collection are important because they raise the possibility that modern life did not have to be lived within the confines of the stereotypes that were frequently promoted by mass media. These actual kitchens were sites of reuse and home-making in its most literal sense; yet they are held up as exemplars of modern living. They are between the actual and the imagined or the staged and the real. The imperfections of the environments they present are understood as assets and symbols of mediation and by association, empowerment. One can thereby infer that in the end, the process of remodelling may have resulted in changing the interiors and the inhabitants together.

How is this historical study relevant to our contemporary consideration of the interior as a state of becoming? The photographs of these kitchens capture the notion of space in transition—clearly these rooms were once in an unimproved state, yet the potential of their further refinement is not masked. In their implied candidness, they evoke notions of authenticity as nearly every photograph expresses the essence of habitation, as though the homemaker has merely stepped away from the scene for a moment. Susan Sontag once noted that ‘one of the perennial successes of photography has been its strategy of turning living beings into things, things into living beings.’ As documentary evidence of design ingenuity and the value of modern convenience and aesthetics, the animated quality of much of the imagery in this unusual photographic repository raises questions about the ability of the sanitized imagery that dominates design media today to represent the dynamic ability of interior spaces in a state of becoming to promote new models for designing and living.


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