Cabinet Magazine: Kitchen I & II

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The Bass House was number 20 in a series of "Case Study Houses" published in the California monthly magazine, *Arts and Architecture*. The Case Study House Program was initiated in the late 1940s to propose design solutions for the postwar lifestyle and to showcase affordable, innovative building methods and materials.

The architects of the 1958 Bass House—Buff, Straub, and Hensman—spoke of the kitchen as a "laboratory," evoking Le Corbusier's technological metaphor for the house as a "machine for living." The laboratory metaphor was especially fitting for the Bass House kitchen, which was designed in consultation with the woman of the house, Dr. Ruth Bass, a practicing biochemist.

In interviews, the architects involved in the Case Study House Program recall being caught up in the excitement of designing what a few described as a "brave new world." The use of new layouts and building technologies as a means of reconfiguring how the family functions—and by extension, how society functions—infused the program with a vision of a utopian future attainable through good design.

My father, Terry Gower, worked for an architectural firm in San Francisco before opening his practice in British Columbia in the late 1950s. His early work in Canada reflected the optimism and ideals of the California Modernists. His firm was involved in the planning of a Corbusian civic plaza consisting of a city hall, police headquarters, museum, and library, laid out in a superblock of gardens, plazas, and fountains. This complex was built not far from his recreation center project, which housed the town's concert hall and sports facilities.

I grew up surrounded by my father's architecture: our friends' houses, *all* civic buildings, schools, even the local ski resort. Once my parents had to retrieve me from my father's police station after my first run-in with the law. So much of our environment bore the mark of my father that my family seemed to be taking part in some kind of utopian experiment. What you see in the image of the Gower House kitchen is my mother posing for an architectural photographer's camera. My mother, like Ruth Bass, is shown playing the role of the Modernist Mother. Taking up her position in the home's security and control center (the kitchen), the elegant, empowered Modernist Mother is depicted preparing food for her children. The experiment didn't last forever: my mother quickly tired of her role, and, pursuing a career in government, hired a replacement to take over her position in our Modernist kitchen.

Ruth Bass in the kitchen of the Bass House (Case Study House No. 20),1958. Conrad Buff, Calvin Straub, Donald Hensman, architects. Julius Shulman, photographer. Altadena, California,1958

Rosalie Gower in the kitchen of the Gower House,1965. Terry Gower, architect. John Fulker, photographer. Vernon, British Columbia,1965

above and opposite: The Kitchen Debate between Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and US Vice-President Richard Nixon, 24 July 1959.

SIMMERING STATECRAFT

SANDY ISENSTADT

The distinctively modern form of the kitchen blossomed with the Austrian architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky's 1926 "Frankfurter Küche," which was installed in thousands of units of social housing in Germany. Following principles described a dozen years before by the home economist Christine Frederick (who in turn drew on Frederick Winslow Taylor's time-motion studies intended to help streamline factory labor), Schütte-Lihotzky designed task-specific, built-in cabinets, along with hinged and sliding surfaces that could be swiftly summoned, used, and stowed away, making room for the next step in the dinner algorithm. By concentrating utility precisely, as in the compact kitchens of ships and trains, she diminished the spatial concessions to convenience and pared the minutes required for particular chores. And she placed a large window at the end of the narrow galley to assure that all surfaces would be washed with bright, natural light. As it began to orbit around similar ideas of frictionless functioning, modernism saw in the kitchen a confirmation that it was the style most intimate with the industrial *Zeitgeist* and could therefore transcend the question of style, and national origin, altogether.

But streamlining function was never the ultimate aim of any version of modernism. Rather, the benefit of a rationalized architecture was a liberated individual, a man or woman freed from drudgery because mechanization had overtaken repetitive and spiritless tasks. In this context, the kitchen became a place not simply to do certain things; it also became a place to display those doings. It was a space where efficiency itself might be aestheticized, that is, a modern kitchen not only was efficient, it *looked* efficient, and so came to symbolize the virtues of a design approach that abjured symbols. In other words, the kitchen's representational value became just as important as its use value; together, an uneasy alliance of usefulness and representation underpins our understanding of the modern kitchen.

With the general acceptance of modernism after World War II, the symbolic value of the kitchen became only more important. Widespread electrification and

greater use of small countertop appliances allowed various kitchen functions to be spatially concentrated even further. But whatever efficiencies were gained were usually cast, in the context of an American consumer society, less in terms of greater productivity than in terms of more leisure, that is to say, making women's labor within the kitchen more efficient ostensibly freed them for activities outside the kitchen. With leisure the benefit, manufacturers such as General Electric could, without irony, begin their appliance catalogs with an invitation to "Come out of the Kitchen and Enjoy Life."

That such an understanding was commonly held was demonstrated by the "Kitchen Debate" that occurred between Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and US Vice-President Richard Nixon, in front of a model kitchen on display at a trade exhibition in Moscow, on 24 July 1959. The United States Department of State had at least a decade earlier launched a series of exhibitions, from fine arts to consumer goods, to alloy the nation's decisive wartime show of economic and military superiority with claims of cultural richness and breadth. The private home, the crowning good of American consumer culture, was a frequent star in such events, which proved deeply compelling to those whose lives had been interrupted by Fascism and war. Domestic themes resonated strongly with pre-war memories and post-war hopes of tens of millions of Europeans, although American visions of impending bounty were as often disparaged as they were envied. Nixon continued such themes in Moscow, asserting that the United States' global leadership was not based on its vast arsenal so much as on the fullness of daily life for the average family. He granted, for example, that the Soviet Union had better rocket engines but Americans had color television. Khrushchev, guardedly admiring the American kitchen appliances, promised in any case to surpass American consumer goods within a few years, and he indicted American industry more broadly for depleting itself on gimmicks and gizmos. The Soviet Union, he claimed, instead focused on making women more productive in their domestic work. On the defensive, Nixon countered, "What we want to do is make easier the life of our housewives." The US was an aggregate of families, he suggested, and so an easier life legitimated a national economy based on consumer goods—such as those the two leaders stood before—and validated the spread of consumer capitalism worldwide.

Kitchens, it was clear, were no less ideologically charged for Khrushchev. At least since 1952, the improvement of everyday standards of living had become an explicit theme of the Soviet government, with private, rather than communal, apartments a new means to assuage a housing shortage and enhance daily life. Women, in particular, were recognized as captains of domestic consumption and so took on a new role in the national economy. Soviet planners turned to earlier models of rationalized design (Lenin himself had admired what he called "American efficiency") that could reconcile greater consumption with communist principles. Kitchens, as the domestic center of command and the most visible site of women's labor in the home, came in for renewed attention. Although sponsored by the state and explicitly in service to political ideals, the kitchen was portrayed as a matter of personal convenience, family well-being, and national potency. Both versions of Cold War kitchens helped redeem the labor of women, although the economic value of domestic labor in the Soviet model took a back seat to the promise of leisure in the American version. But, as has often been noted, easing the labor of women in the private sphere of the home was not at all the same as guaranteeing them a position in the public sphere.