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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The kitchen in urban dwellings in Barcelona, 1920-1950: Out of step with modern architecture

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Abstract

Changes in spaces for cooking and eating are fundamental to modern architecture. Proposals and studies conducted in America from the 19th century and in Europe mainly from the 1920s have caused architectural debates on the nature of the kitchen space, i.e., to achieve either spaces that are organized and efficient or spaces for working and living. Modern architecture has transformed the kitchen and determined its appearance throughout the 20th century. The intensity of this transformation has depended on social, technical, and architectural contexts. In this study, we focus on how modern architectural approaches influenced dwellings in Barcelona, Spain between the 1920s and the 1950s. The study demonstrates that changes did not occur regularly and were limited to the incorporation of certain services or technological improvements. During this period, cooking and eating spaces were not considered in depth and were treated as areas of secondary importance within dwellings. Changes only became significant from the 1950s onward, when economic improvements, technological innovations, the housing problem, and the gradual arrival of Western cultural references changed the values of these spaces.

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1. Introduction

Residential buildings constructed to house the growing population associated with industrialization are key

elements in the formation of contemporary cities. The dwellings in these buildings and their spaces and functions must be classified. Each dwelling must meet the various needs of everyday life by defining the spaces and their interrelations. The discipline of architecture has gradually assumed responsibility, sometimes in a limited way, for the arrangement of the main living areas, such as spaces for

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cooking and eating, sleeping and relaxing, and personal hygiene. In this context, the kitchen and dining room that had been central and versatile in traditional houses gradually became defined specialized spaces with resources, services, and amenities that shaped them. These spaces had to be systematized and situated within a standard architectural logic on the basis of limited surface areas.

An analysis of the transformation and evolution of cooking and eating spaces provides key information that helps us to understand a considerable part of domestic culture. If we consider these spaces within dwellings, the analysis can go beyond the form aspect. This analysis can reveal some of the values associated with food and cooking depending on the economic capacities of families and the extent to which the continuation of domestic services affects them. Furthermore, the effects of the values given to everyday tasks within dwellings and the relation between spaces and gender roles on the interest in and the evolution of these spaces can be identified. The concern for efficiency and good organization of these spaces and their relation within dwellings can also be illustrated. In urban dwellings, these considerations are marked by the impact of technology, both in terms of dependency on utility networks and kitchen equipment.

Changes in the spaces for cooking and eating were central to modern architecture. In fact, modern architecture proposals marked and determined the appearance of these spaces throughout the 20th century. These proposals were based on publications and studies conducted at the end of the 19th century in the United States, which reached the environments of European modern architecture at the beginning of the 20th century (Clarisse, 2004; Eleb, 1995; Giedion, 1969; Lupton, 1992; Spechtenhauser, 2006). The ideas of Catherine Beecher¹ and Christine Frederick² were considered as the origin of the organization and efficiency of these spaces in a society, such as that of America, where no domestic service occurred. These ideas focused on two main characteristics, namely, organized, efficient spaces and spaces for working and living (in which the kitchen is also a place for eating). Studies were undertaken from the perspective of those who use these spaces.

Some of the proposals arrived directly in the circles of the European avant-garde or were complemented by other studies close to Taylorism, such as those by Lilian Gilberth.³ The proposals were assimilated with different readings and interpretations. First, they formed the basis of what is called the laboratory kitchen, which is a space that is measured and fully equipped according to the rationality of work and ergonomic criteria, an important example of

which is the Frankfurt kitchen by Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky. Despite the notable role of Shütte-Lihotzky, in this interpretation, the kitchen is no longer a space designed for women but one assigned to them to recognize the value of their work within a home. Second, the proposals served as the basis for interpreting the kitchen as a living space, which had been a central argument in the evolution of kitchens from the 1960s. Third, the proposals established the basis of one of the key arguments in the organization of modern housing, that is, rationality within dwellings. The kitchen-dining room relationship is one of the main arguments behind functional organization.

A key study to understand the changes and new proposals that emerged in avant-garde architecture is that of Catherine Clarisse (2004), who conducted an exhaustive analysis of cases, presented models, and continuities in examining the evolution of these spaces in the European context. She traced the line of evolution to understand the contributions and limitations of avant-garde architecture and how they affected European architectural culture during the 20th century. Her analysis helps us to compare the situation with Barcelona and understand the differences from the reality in this city. Clarisse considered that changes in these spaces occurred in three phases. First, from the 1920s, space was lost to gain time, which led to a small kitchen interpreted as a laboratory. Second, from 1950, the kitchen space had disappeared because service networks enabled its integration into the living room; therefore, the kitchen space was minimized. Finally, the minimal kitchen was set aside and the kitchen became a space for living.

Our objective was to study the spaces for cooking and eating in dwellings in Barcelona from the 1920s to the 1950s. The aim was to determine whether connections between Clarisse's statements on European modern architecture and the reality of urban dwellings in Barcelona existed in the specification and definition of these spaces. We examined whether the principles of good organization and rationalization of work were integrated into the kitchen space, whether cooking and eating spaces were truly analyzed and debated in architecture, and how they were influenced by the international architectural debate. We also assessed the impact of technology in terms of service networks and appliances, which facilitate and reduce everyday tasks and lead to changes in habits.

2. Documentary sources

We used several analysis levels to study the kitchen space, considering that this area varies depending on dwellings. The definition, evolution, and amenities of the kitchen are associated with the category of a house (whether it has domestic servants), the availability of service networks and general services in the neighborhood, access to certain provisions, and the proximity of markets. Consequently, we differentiated the kitchen space by social level because it may determine one path or another in the evolution of kitchen and eating spaces within a dwelling. First, we analyzed singular dwellings of the wealthy, namely, buildings that were either detached or residential buildings where the owner occupied the main floor, the ground floor, and sometimes also a basement and a first floor. These

¹Author of numerous publications, one of which exerted a particular impact, namely, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School* (1842).

²*The New Housekeeping: Efficiency Studies in Home Management* (1913) by Christine Frederick was translated into German in 1921 by Irene Witte and exerted a considerable influence on architects. *Scientific Management in the Home* (1919) was translated in 1922.

³Lillian Gilbreth (1878-1972), a psychologist, and Frank Gilbreth (1868-1924), a student of Taylor, studied the motions of work with the use of a camera. The book *Cheaper by the Dozen* (year), by their sons Ernestine and Frank Gilbreth, describes their daily life and how it was influenced by their mother's studies.

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