BACK TO THE CITY, THE KITCHEN & THE SUBURBS

TRENDS IN RESIDENTIAL SETTLEMENT, FOOD CULTURE & DOMESTIC LABOUR PRACTICES SINCE WWII

USHMA THAKRAR
ADVISORS/ ELLIOTT SCLAR & DOUGLAS WOODWARD
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Thank you to Elliott Sclar for his patient advising and to Douglas Woodward for his thoughtful guidance.
And to my parents, whose support I have rarely deserved but always receive unconditionally.
The kitchen has always been a central tenant in the American household. Allusions to the kitchen as both the ‘heart’ and the ‘hearth’ of the family evoke both to the normative notions of the kitchen as the designated space for domestic food preparation and as the station of the female head of household: both fundamental sources of life for the household space. The residential kitchen has historically been understood through these two fundamental aspects, to the point of its being indistinguishable as an independent entity from either the presence of food or the nurturing presence of the archetype of the mother-figure. As the kitchen is inseparable from the female head of household and the food which she prepares (or, rather, is expected to prepare), so is the collectively placed value on women and food inseparable from the design of the domestic kitchen; its architectural and ornamental treatments, applied usage of technology and relationships to other domestic spaces are all telling of social and spatial hierarchies within the household. The kitchen space is necessarily described by food and both are necessarily described by the presence that activates them – all three are implicated in a trichotomy in which each implies and influences the others. This study narrates the critical intersections between patterns in residential settlement, trends in food culture and domestic labour practices in North America, as influenced by the structural forces that were institutionalized in the narrative of the American Dream. While standards for normative American living, as read through the domestic kitchens occupied by the majority of the population, have changed since the 1950s, there remains a structural nostalgia for the American Dream developed in and for the specific condition of the postwar suburbs. This nostalgia in its intersection with contemporary kitchen spaces, domestic labour practices and food culture constructs them to be fundamentally at odds with one another and the premise of residing in dense urban spaces needlessly difficult.
THE RESIDENTIAL KITCHEN

TERMS OF ANALYSIS

The kitchen has always been a central tenant in the American household. Allusions to the kitchen as both the ‘heart’ and the ‘hearth’ of the family evoke both to the normative notions of the kitchen as the designated space for domestic food preparation and as the station of the female head of household: both fundamental sources of life for the household space. The residential kitchen has historically been understood through these two fundamental aspects, to the point of its being indistinguishable as an independent entity from either the presence of food or the nurturing presence of the archetype of the mother-figure. As the kitchen is inseparable from the female head of household and the food which she prepares (or, rather, is expected to prepare), so is the collectively placed value on women and food inseparable from the design of the domestic kitchen; its architectural and ornamental treatments, applied usage of technology and relationships to other domestic spaces are all telling of social and spatial hierarchies within the household. The kitchen space is necessarily described by food and both are necessarily described by the presence that activates them – all three are implicated in a trichotomy in which each implies and influences the others.

The residential kitchen also acts as an important threshold between the public and private spheres and is marked by this relationship. The kitchen is a space of consumption and the preparer of food is charged with mediating between the consumer goods (the economic marketplace) that enter the home-space and the extent to which they are altered or not with her pre-political and pre-economic labour before other members of the household come into contact with them. This act of mediation that occurs in the kitchen space, is not without agency, but is deeply influenced by external conditions. The economic climate and the financial attainment of the household heavily influences what can be purchased and dictates the time of the members of the household to alter said purchases. Likewise, normative views about gender roles, food culture and residential settlement patterns each influence the ideal mode of domestic labour. This interconnected value system around lifestyle, in its North American manifestation has been termed The American Dream, and has played a fundamental role in the development of all aspects of American culture since the 1950s. This narrative of the American Dream readily dictates the ideals for each aspect of the kitchen-food-domestic labour trichotomy, but has not always done so that it recognizes their interdependencies. However, the influence of American Dream allows for one to read the changes in kitchen-design as changes changes in the collectively held beliefs and values regarding food and food preparation as mechanism to satisfy the universal and pre-political need of nourishment. This research aims to demonstrate this relationship between the North-American kitchen, food culture and their combined implications about popular understandings of feminism and domestic labour practices.

EARLY HISTORY

This research takes the Back-to-the-City movement as its central focus, which narratively and logically must begin with the consideration of the developments in residential settlement that occurred in North America in the era following the Second World War. The postwar suburb necessarily serves as the point of departure in order to contextualize the Back-to-the-City movement and to be able to understand its as a new and differentiated pattern of urban settlement through the comparison. The postwar suburb further serves to create a backdrop by which to understand the differences posited by these seemingly opposite residential settlement patterns. While the postwar suburb acts as the primary point of comparison for the Back-to-the-City movement, the development of the postwar suburb in North America requires a similar historical construction to understand the significance of the departure it marked for not just American housing, but for American values, ideology and lifestyle. This chapter briefly constructs an origin story by which to conceptualize the postwar suburb through the American industrial city of the early twentieth century. The industrial city is read through the changes in the residential kitchen and food culture and their inherent implications about both domestic and social life at the time.

Perhaps the most significant developments to American life in the early nineteenth century came with the implementation of cold rooms into the city’s infrastructure. Cold rooms, which allowed for food storage at longer time intervals, combined with the advances in transportation technologies and cheap oil made food transportation a reasonably profitable model (at an industrial scale) during the early 1900s. Food consumption was inherently changed by this new capacity, from being defined by its necessarily hyper-local boundary to having a much further, regional reach. While these new modes of food consumption became technologically feasible, they remained out of reach for a number of working families living on working-class incomes. Food was marked as either local or regional and in this distinction became classified as either necessity or luxury. The food product came to broadcast the wealth, status and values of its consumer (as the adage goes, “you are what you eat”). These advances in modes of food consumption began the conversion of the food product as a natural and primitive good into a conspicuous necessity or luxury. The food product came to broadcast the wealth, status and values of its consumer (as the adage goes, “you are what you eat”).

The food products that were consumed by the majority were while becoming slightly more exotic and less seasonal, were still largely prepared in the household, in the space of the residential kitchen. While the residential spaces of the early 1900s were significantly different from those that were to take shape on the landscape of the United States a mere fifty years later, these homes provide a useful comparison to those of the postwar suburb due to the typical inclusion of indoor plumbing in these spaces, which marked a massive change in domestic work. Another large change in the mode of domestic work at this time was that household labour came to be performed by the female head of household. While it had previously been common for the average household to employ servants, this was no longer the case at the turn of the century. Regardless of this household having no functional relationship to a servant culture, its formal manifestation continued to emphasize the kitchen as the domain of the servant through its separation from all the other domestic spaces associated with home-life. The kitchen of the early 1900s was largely out of sight, either tucked away in a corner or kept under the stairs, as the kitchen of the domestic servant would have been in order to keep the spaces of domesticity separate from the spaces of domestic labour that coexisted within the household. When this work was taken on by the female head of household, the kitchen remained outside of and separated from the living space and her presence while doing domestic chores was excluded from the familial sphere.

Architectural theorist, Joan Greenbaum’s analysis of the development of the kitchen space in early North American homes takes as its focus the spatial distribution of domestic activities across household spaces. By Greenbaum’s account of this early manifestation of the standard American dwelling in 1910, its kitchen is to have been primarily occupied by a large table and, secondly by a sizeable cast iron stove. These furnishings are telling of the kitchen as a hub for activities that were not strictly limited to food preparation. The massive table and the large stove left very little space for anything or anyone else in the relatively small kitchen. The size of this table is indicative of a multi-purpose work surface, as it is known not to have been the site for food consumption. Dining was consolidated with the other living spaces of the household, in the formal dining room. While the large kitchen table would later be read as a sign of the kitchen’s socialization, it is only once dining rooms become less prevalent and mealtimes become more and more informal. In the early nineteenth century, however, the dining room was still fully functional and mealtimes...
As progress in gender rights was being made by First Wave feminists, there were significant changes being made to typical household designs of the time. These new model homes essentially changed the relationships between living spaces and kitchens, and in doing so changed the spatial distribution of domestic work in the household. The key tenet of the suffragettes’ activism was to allow women to have the ability to choose to have full participation in the socio-political spheres, in which their presence had previously been contentious, if not completely forbidden. The activism of the suffragettes is often reduced to the activism that garnered women the right to vote in North America in the 19th century and whereas this is certainly an important aspect of the work of these women, it is a manifestation of the ideology that promotes the participation of women in society (and politics) which were previously exclusively patriarchal spaces. Though many understand both politics and American society to have continued to be a primarily male construction, the legal, official standing is that of gender equality, whether or not it is actually manifested in the social imaginary or collective values. While the degree of success of the feminist activist’s ability to reshape American values is debatable, shortly following the peak of First Wave feminism the domestic kitchen was integrated with living spaces and the female at its helm was reintroduced into familial life.

Around this time, the female identity became reconstructed by progressives with the New Woman construct. The New Woman portrayed a woman who was increasingly independent from her husband/family and has a decided presence in the public sphere. The female presence in public space eased the transition to seeing women in the workplace during the First World War, when it was encouraged (and necessary) for women to work outside of the home. The First World War deployed a significant faction of the American workforce, almost entirely male, overseas, which left a massive hole in the country’s production economy. Production was, however, crucial to the war effort, which demanded a continuous stream of supplies and goods that were unavailable to the deployed men, abroad. American women (and occasionally children) filled those spots to act as providers for their families and played an instrumental role in the “success” of war effort and the maintenance of the national economy. A function of the employment of women during the First World War was to begin to problematize a number of biases that were held as the majority opinion at the time regarding the home as the singular place for women, through their demonstrated capacities to participate as civic individuals, while much of the male workforce was at war.

It was also during World War I that food was understood as a powerful weapon. Though there was no enforced rationing during the First World War, there was a large federal campaign asking citizens to save food products for American troops and their allies with concepts like Meatless Mondays and Wheatless Wednesdays. The U.S. Food Administration was charged with the administration of the Allies’ food reserves and with that charge, the American population was asked to contribute to the War specifically with limiting food consumption and wasted food product. While the food rationing was not as severe as it was in the Second World War, this mode of thought in which domestic work has civic implications is important in the opening paths of exchange between social expectations and individual, domestic practices.

Through World War I, the idea of women as civic beings was forwarded in their performing economic work and their domestic work playing an instrumental role in a national cause. This ideology persisted after the war and after men had returned to the country and resumed their posts in the workforce and as heads of households, though to a lesser degree. Much of the rhetoric of women’s roles in War effort at home was focused on it being a temporary condition “until he comes home.” With the end of the War everyone was quick to return to the status-quo. Women’s magazines like Good Housekeeping saw the end of the war as an opportunity to restart the campaign for prewar family values, with its normative gender roles. While copy reflected this set of values by focusing on tips for cooking, cleaning and caring for husbands and children (i.e. domestic labour), the imagery in both articles and advertisements showed idealized women performing a variety of tasks in the household, but most often in the kitchen space. Though not necessarily explicit about the architecture of the ideal kitchen, women’s magazines introduced new standards for the kitchen space that made it more central in the household space through the imagery they employed to illustrate articles that outlined ideals for domestic life. In this manifestation of domestic space, the kitchen table was assigned a new functionality: it became a surface that was designated for family activities like breakfast, homework, after-school snacks and even lunch, though social standards still dictated dinner to be had the in the dining room. Any social function of family life not specifically assigned to the dining room or the parlour was moved into the kitchen and it quickly came to symbolically represent all domestic life, rather than just the station of the female head of household.

Shortly following the post-World War I era, came the Great Depression and North American women returned to workforce and continued to perform domestic work. The scope of domestic work was expanded during the Depression, as women took on chores that had previously been outsourced to the economic arena, due to the lack of personal and collective resources. Feminism, though not a particularly visible or organized movement during the 1930s was pragmatically operationalized (not necessarily ideologically) in the sharing of household chores between family units in order to most efficiently economically provide for the domestic needs of their individual families. This model of sharing housework later formed the foundation upon which a number of feminist authors based their proposals for Feminist Utopias, after the Second World War.

The scarce resources available in this time also resulted in homes becoming increasingly functional in an attempt to reduce costs and save time. Household functions that previously took place in the dining room and the parlour were consolidated in the kitchen, which in its centrally located position was the easiest (and, more importantly, the cheapest) of the three rooms to keep heated. Family life was, out of necessity, fully located in the kitchen, in a time where survival required collective efforts that overlooked any individual differences. This was the dominant trend in kitchen design and usage from the 1920s onwards, its becoming more and more integrated into the household and eventually holding the most centralized and prominent position within the dwelling and its absorbing more and more of the functions and activities of family life. This model for the kitchen was incorporated into popular media and advertising, announcing this socialized’ kitchen (and the somewhat socialized woman at its helm) as the new norm.


Miller, Timothy. *The Path to the Table: Cooking in Postwar American Suburbs*. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2018.) p. 28.
In its conception, the postwar suburb was largely understood as a complete departure from the dense urban fabric of the cities, represented a
paradigm shift in North American planning practices. Though the development of American suburbs certainly predated the suburbs of the 1950s,
it was during this time period, specifically, that a number of political, economic and social factors simultaneously existed to collectively construct
this particular suburb to be at once attainable and desirable to a large faction of the North American population. The postwar suburb attempted
(and in some ways continues) to distinguish itself physically and ideologically from the city while still being highly dependent on it. The suburban
condition requires the city, not only to define itself through opposition but also for the employment of its residents and the economic marketplace
that was located exclusively in urban centres at the end of the Second World War. In the postwar period, when the suburban condition was still
quite new and transportation technologies were not as advanced as they are today, the urban centre was essentially the only domain of political
and economic life. This relationship to the city is embedded in the suburbs’ history that developed out of possibilities to commute to an urban
core, while living outside of it, but the suburb is characterized by its denial of this dependence. It was in the postwar suburbs’ negation of its
relationship to the city that allowed it to be understood as a tabula rasa (in addition to their being created where nothing or very little construction
had previously taken place on the sites on which they were developed) and made it a fertile ground in which to create the form of dwelling that
would come to represent the newly formulated ideals couched in the narrative of the American Dream.

The American Dream title was formulated in the postwar period to consolidate and package a set of values and beliefs that from that point
onwards was to be associated with the American people and evoke the prosperity they experienced following the Second World War. While
this terminology of the ‘American Dream’ had been used in political rhetoric as early as the Declaration of Independence, and since then has held
a connotation of the freedom of the nation and its population throughout the nineteenth century, in the twentieth century, its meaning changed
radically, but continued to be an important device in political rhetoric. While the ‘dream’ still retained freedom as a tenet, the core of its meaning
changed to focus on what was afforded by freedom: freedom was constructed to be the means to a greater end. In the context of postwar America
this end was specifically the freedom to consume.

While the idea of the American Dream predated the postwar suburb, images of this suburb have come to be the visual equated with the values
that were evoked by the American Dream. This intersection of the American people in their values and their residential settlement patterns in this
cross section of time makes the postwar period particularly relevant to the study as it allows for a point of departure in which the core tenets of the
analysis (housing, food culture and domestic labour practices) are ideologically aligned. The alignment all of these elements, in a space that
was newly being developed, using the latest technologies, served to mark these planned spaces with the commonly held values of the population.

The importance of the postwar suburb, in contrast to its predecessors, is that in the particular conditions of the postwar period created this suburb to
be affordable and ideal for a critical mass of Americans. Furthermore, the marketing of these suburban spaces narrated them as the polar opposite
of the inner cities, which were perceived to be places with diverse populations, buildings and uses. While the values and rhetoric that address ideas
of diversity and plurality are generally perceived as a favourable condition today, in the 1950s, these qualities were understood as alienation,
chaos and the marker of “rootless individuals with loose morals.” In the suburbs’ representation as contrary to these urban spaces, there was a
homogeneous narrative created around not only in the designs of these spaces, but also their cultural and social aspects.

This suburb’s affordability was particular to the postwar period, and was a significant draw for much of the population to this relatively new
typology of residential settlement. This affordability was two-fold, in that it was created by a general increase in the incomes of Americans
following the Second World War, on the demand side and a number of policies and programs that were designed to maintain and grow the
prosperity being enjoyed by the country at the time. On the supply side, this postwar prosperity has been popularly portrayed to be an attribute
of American political economy. The American people largely understood capitalism and democracy to have specifically created this prosperous
condition, especially in light of the economy in the Communist nations of the time. Whereas the general public believed their newfound wealth
was a fortuitous side-effect of the American political-economic, there were a number of federal policies put in place that institutionalized this
economic inflation such that it was not simply a ‘happy coincidence.’

Following the Second World War, large numbers of soldiers returned home, prepared to settle down and start families. While their intention
was to buy homes for their future families, the War had entirely halted construction for nearly six years nor was the maintenance of the existing
housing stock a priority in that period of time. The lack of construction before and during the war meant that by 1947 (once demobilized soldiers
had returned to the United States) six million American families were doubling up with friends or relatives and another half million were living
in temporary housing. The housing shortage was so extreme that the military began to sell its surplus of Quonset huts to the public. Likewise,
the military contractors that fabricated the huts for the war effort continued to fabricate them throughout the postwar years for the general public
to act as temporary housing stock. In a similar vein, the mobile home industry was highly profitable at this time. Entire neighbourhoods and
communities of these temporary modes of housing existed in the early postwar years, while the construction industry got ready to begin producing
houses at an unprecedented rate.

This new, rapidly constructed housing stock was decidedly different than that which existed prior to the war. While suburban development was
not a new condition, the massive demand for housing, specifically new housing, required builders to focus all their attention upon previously
undeveloped areas that were proximate enough to cities to facilitate a daily commute. A major change from the earlier, prewar suburbs was that
these new suburbs were not necessarily located to have access to public transportation services that facilitated the connection to the city (and
to jobs). The suburban expansion of the 1920s largely sprawled from streetcar and commuter rail lines, which was said to allow for the combination
of small-town living with city working. While these early suburbs laid the groundwork for the development of the postwar suburbs, their
consumers were decidedly different. The houses of the earliest suburbs were considered luxury products, and were marketed and sold on that basis
to wealthy business men who could afford to move their wives and children away from the heavily industrial inner-cities of the time. Though
these spaces were exclusive and not built for the masses, this early suburban expansion was the first to create a physical separation between the
economic realm and that of the domestic space which was reproduced in the suburban space of the 1950s, which housed the majority.

This separation of the economic from the domestic in urban space produced a consequent gendering of space in the postwar era. The gender-
dichotomy started to become aligned with an urban one in the 1920s; the city was a male space and the suburb a female space. This reading
was based on the male head of household’s social expectation to economically provide for his family and the suburb was read as a female space through the
normative role of the female head of household as a (unpaid) domestic labourer. Once domestic space was understood as female, the suburban
realm as an exclusively domestic urban form was consequently also gendered as female.

The postwar suburbs are most frequently classified by the primary mode of transportation that its residents used to commute to the city: railway
suburbs, streetcar suburbs, etc. The developments of transportation technologies and infrastructure brought with them the ability to make longer
commutes between one’s residence and place work in reasonable amounts of time. As the suburb gained prominence in the American consciousness,
the tolerance for longer commutes also increased, allowing suburbs to spread further from cities, without increased efficiencies in transportation
capabilities.

This freedom to consume was particular in the postwar era because of the new ability of much of the population to participate, but also due to the
prevail of Communism, abroad. Consumption was thought to be the mechanism by which America could stay off Communism from affecting the
country’s own political economy.

The United States experienced a hugely depressed economy in the 1930s (The Great Depression), not long before the beginning of World War II in
1939. The time elapsed during these two events was marked with very minimal residential construction.

The American Quonset huts were modeled after the British Nissen huts that were used during the First World War. The Quonset huts were designed
as all-purpose, lightweight buildings that could be shipped anywhere and did not require skilled labour to be assembled. The original module was five
meters by eleven meters and almost two and a half meters at its highest point that was steel framed structure and clad in corrugated steel sheets. Each
end of the Quonset hut was clad in plywood, which provided a point of entry and allowed for light and cross ventilation through windows cut out of those
surfaces. The Quonset huts’ flexible interior space allowed them to be used as barracks, latrines, offices, isolation huts, barracks and the like during the war,
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a mass exodus of their residential populations, who made the move to the suburbs. The suburban space was understood as the ideal and moral space in which to raise a family. The urban-suburban (and male-female) separation was reproduced, and exaggerated in the postwar era, with the developments in transportation technologies which made it such that the personal automobile became a relatively reliable and affordable mode of transportation for most middle class families. Furthermore, the federal government’s focus on the construction of highways, institutionalized in the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, added 41,000 miles of road to the existing road network, which worked to expand the reach of the city and its services. Both the highway and the automobile served to make the city space easily accessible from the suburbs (and vice versa). With these developments, the perceived distances (and in some cases, the real distances) between suburbs and cities were shortened in the collectively-held social imaginary, which opened a massive expanse of land for developers to operate on that remained attractive to the general consumer.

More than technologically possible or convenient or even ideal, the postwar suburb’s affordability for the middle class was the crux of its success. This affordability was constructed and maintained through a number of federal policies. A policy that was instrumental to shaping the suburbs and was specifically designed with the intent of resettling the population following the War was the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act (colloquially known as the GI Bill) of 1944. This act granted eligible veterans no money down loans for housing and social services to ease the transition from soldier to citizen. Another government intervention that helped make the new suburban housing stock affordable was the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). Though this program was introduced in 1934, previous to the postwar period, the program’s ramifications were most deeply felt following World War II. The FHA was, essentially, a government-backed insurance policy for lenders providing mortgages. As such, FHA-approved lenders had the backing of the government, so if a homeowner was to default on a loan, the lender could recuperate the majority of the loaned amount from the government. This greatly reduced the risk of lending for private firms and meant that they were willing to lend more (up to ninety-three percent of a home’s value) and lend at dramatically reduced interest rates. Through the Federal Housing Administration program, homeownership was made more accessible through affordable and accessible means of financing. Through this mode of financing certainly contributed to the eminence of the suburb, the booming economy following the war also allowed for the greater affordability of suburban homes regardless of the new financing options. The prevalent economic climate in the postwar period instigated an unprecedented growth in the middle class, through a general rise in incomes and wages and lowering in prices of basic manufactured goods, which greatly contributed to the ability of Americans to purchase the new homes in the suburbs. Furthermore, due to the high rate of citizens’ savings during the war (three times what it was before or after the war) and wartime rationing, which had made it impossible to buy many things that consumers would have otherwise purchased, after the war things (like houses) were purchased because they were viewed as accessible and affordable for the first time in years.

While all these factors simultaneously operated to produce the possibility for the creation and consumption of the postwar suburb, the notion that there was a singular postwar suburb that occurred at the intersection of all these forces, is reductive of other, diverse modes of dwellings that existed in the period. This narrative of the middle-class suburb of the era is the one that is most often recounted, regardless of the other typologies it leaves out. The reason that this suburban narrative is continuously retold, regardless of what is excluded, is that the development of these suburbs was the most recent tabula rasa-development in the United States. The fact that there were no existing artifacts on the sites of development (nor any notable appreciation of sustainable design practices that responded to the natural environment) and that there was available money, allows us to assume that the housing spaces that were produced in this time were designed as per collectively held ideals about housing and lifestyle; the postwar suburb was at its most essential the physical manifestation of the American Dream. This suburb was not only a manifestation of that dream, but since its inception, many have cited this urban form as a political mechanism by which to enforce a single ideology of political conservatism and conspicuous consumerism on the multiple and diverse constituents of the United States of America, regardless of their actual participation (or ability to participate) in the suburban space.

POSTWAR HOUSES

The homes of the postwar suburbs have as their historical predecessors the homes designed by Catharine Beecher and Andrew Jackson Downing for the earliest American suburbs and represent the earliest model designs that were designed specifically to be replicated. These homes were designed at the commissions of wealthy businessmen, whose affluence allowed them to move their families out of the urban centers (which in the late 1800s were heavily industrial and extremely over-crowded, the combination of which created poor living conditions). Though they were working primarily on these case-by-case commissions, Beecher and Downing’s project quickly became one of prototypes for suburban housing, which were embraced and propagated by a number of women’s magazines. The husband, who was always the wage earner in this historical instance, would commute on the new railroad systems back to city - where his life remained focused. The home became entirely separated from the public, economic and political spheres that existed in the urban setting, despite the poor air quality, and took its definition from its isolation. The culture of consumerism that was (and continues to be) structural to the American value system rationalized this mode of housing and the condition of near isolation that it created became a luxury that was bought - understood equally as a display of wealth as a means to escape the masses and smog of the cityscapes.

In 1896 Beecher designed her now infamous American Woman’s Home, which aimed to create a home that “recalled the values of the Puritan convent community” but simultaneously acknowledged the wealth of the families who could afford the home, through its design. Dolores Hayden, in her book The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities described this house as “a space for women’s domestic labour in service of men and children.” Though this sounds far from a contemporary stance on femininity or equality in gender roles, Beecher was attempting to make this model home the realm of woman in order to match her husband’s ownership of the public realm in their dichotomized relationship. As Hayden points out, Beecher does this with no thought to the differences that exist between the public and private spheres nor the social impact of making domestic labour the sole responsibility of the woman.

The American Woman’s Home, physically represented the ownership of the domestic sphere through a number of strategies. The entire design was meant to serve a large family, in a way that would create efficiencies that would “economize time, labour and expenses.” The major innovation that was made in this home that served as a model for a particular socio-economic class in The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities is the combination of these three essential home functions is interesting for two reasons: one, because, the female head of household now lived in the isolated realm of the female head of household.


17 Beecher’s economization of time and labour, were understood specifically to be the economization of the American woman’s time and labour in her book: The American Woman’s Home, ed. Nicolai Tsonkovich (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002)
The popularity of this model home among affluent families was largely forgotten with the turn of the century. The Victorian houses of the early twentieth century reproduced the houses that predated Catharine Beecher’s design. Starting with the Victorian homes of the early 1900s, the kitchen was, again, hidden in the back of the household like in the earlier domestic designs where housework was the role of the non-familial servant. As this kitchen followed in the tradition of the servant-kitchen, it was not expected that this space be attractive, comfortable or particularly convenient. The kitchen was again hidden and isolated from the other domestic spaces, but with a crucial difference: it was still expected that from this secluded location that the housewife was meant to take care of all domestic work, not just food provision and child care. This layout of the house remained the norm in North American domestic architecture until the houses of the postwar period, which were decidedly different.

The house of the postwar suburb was different because its environment was different, but the values and condition of the American people at this time were also different. Likewise, the technological advancements that had been made in the era allowed for these new American values to be inscribed into residential settlements at an alarming rate. Developers were able to build entire communities in the span of a few months and offer a housing stock that was decidedly different from that existing in the inner-city. These technological advancements were adopted from assembly line processes developed for war manufacturing. After World War II, builders were able to implement an assembly line process in home construction. This new house that was almost entirely prefabricated, on the assembly line was significant not only for the speed of construction it provided, but also in the standardization of much of the new housing stock. This standardization was at once economic for the builder, but also allowed for the Federal Housing Administration to systematically back loans given to houses by certain builders whose designs and construction processes met their minimum requirements of safety, security and soundness. These two processes changed the construction, in that it created standardized norms at a national level.

William Levitt, who was a lieutenant in the United States Naval Construction Forces (NCF) during the Second World War, was instrumental to this standardization of housing and the postwar suburbs’ development. In the war, Levitt learned processes by which to build quickly which he adopted for the construction industry upon his return from deployment. Levitt created an assembly line process with twenty-seven discrete steps. This way his staff became highly specialized and learned how to perform discrete tasks efficiently — division of labour.

Levitt was also an important figure because his entire organization was vertically integrated. His assembly line logic extended from raw materials (owned a lumber mill and cement plant) to marketing of the house. Buying a Levitt home was completely streamlined — requiring minimal time and effort on the part of the consumer. The process of buying a home was, by Levitt and other builders like him and the new lending practices made possible by government policies and the general economic climate following the war, made to be nearly as easy as buying any other consumer product that could be purchased in a department store.

SUBURBAN KITCHEN TYPOLGIES

Though Americans were decidedly more affluent following the Second World War, they were skeptical of their newfound wealth and initially hesitant to spend. To keep the cost of new houses attractive to these residents, not only were they built to last for a limited time, they were much smaller than the pre-war houses. The postwar housing stock’s smaller floor plans meant changes to the design logic of the domestic space and changes to the lifestyle of those families who moved into these spaces.

The most significant change to design in these spaces came from the removal of walls in order give these spaces the semblance of being a comparable size to their prewar counterparts. The open-plan design combined with a new focus of the relationship with the outdoors that was using new, suburban dwellings as collateral. In the 1950s the FHA stipulated either “continuous curvilinear,” which was a modified grid, or “loops and culs-de–sac” street plans demonstrating an implicit preference for suburban settlements, rather than the dense urban industrial cities that developed largely around grid-iron street plans. (Girling, p.108-109)

The Federal Housing Authority’s Minimum Property Standards while falling under these principles were ambiguous enough to apply principles that would dictate that lofts would be assigned only to potential homeowners that were using new, suburban dwellings as collateral. In the 1950s the FHA requirements gave only short-term loans for urban residents, while suburban dwellings could be paid off over a longer period of time. “Safety” requirements were not just of the home but of the neighbourhoods. The safety requirements stipulated either “continuous curvilinear,” which was a modified grid, or “loops and culs-de–sac” street plans demonstrating an implicit preference for suburban settlements, rather than the dense urban industrial cities that developed largely around grid-iron street plans. (Girling, p.108-109)

The kitchen’s new centrality in these homes matched the societal understanding of the woman as central to household. In the new kitchen, the female head of household could now cook a meal while watching the children play in the front yard, or be preparing food while simultaneously entertaining guests in the adjacent living room. The kitchen’s zone was the space for the whole family to occupy. This architectural change gave women a higher position in the domestic hierarchy. What became problematic for every space to be

The new lifestyle, as dictated by the new space of settlement and the new home represented a notable change from the lifestyle afforded by the pre-war houses, as all food-related activities (preparation and both informal and formal dining) were absorbed into a single zone, of which the kitchen was entirely central. The advances in kitchen technologies which were initially touted as increasing efficiencies, were now focused on the result of what added efficiencies in food preparation allowed, more time for the wife/mother to nurture her family as is represented not only in advertisements, but also the standard for the kitchen to now be a ‘homey’ in its decoration, as opposed to its previously clinical and sterile feel.

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the print advertisements that preceded them, demonstrated to women the standards they were expected to maintain in their households and that corporate characters were almost always white women, to the female consumer. This type of campaign required a human touch, and in that vein corporate characters were developed. These corporate prepared without any specialized knowledge, advertisers actively decided to refrain from advertising this aspect of their product, in order not to was newly open to the judgement of the community and was an indicator of social and economic status of the family, but especially impacted the workforce. The maintenance of her household was not singularly for the sake of her family's well-being, but also as a signal of the family's status.

The rate of wartime production that had been instilled in the North American landscape and were quickly adapted to the purposes of peacetime production. This was one of the causes of the general prosperity of the time, but it was also causal of the immense increase in consumer products.

The single-wage earner family, while understood for its defensive utility, was made possible by the general economic prosperity that Americans experienced during the time. This prosperity, while a significant departure from the economy in the preceding three decades, did not immediately change the spending habits of the population. In Timothy Miller’s analysis of the postwar economic climate he says that though economically Americans were better off, they still felt the threat of an economic depression as the memory of the Great Depression was still quite close.

The move to the suburbs created distance between the memory of the Depression through a distance from the city, which served as its site. The suburbs were the destination for millions of middle-class families, and the move to the suburbs included many new expenditures on many new things, especially domestic goods and appliances.

The rate of wartime production that had been instilled in the North American landscape and were quickly adapted to the purposes of peacetime production. This was one of the causes of the general prosperity of the time, but it was also causal of the immense increase in consumer products available. The advertising industry, likewise, experienced a boom in these years - nearly every new product had an ad campaign and every ad campaign allowed insight to the ideals held by American population and how these ideals were at their root, products of the economy’s shift from industrial to advanced capitalism.

Families began having choices in what they bought, but these choices were heavily mediated by the media’s two-pronged attacked dictating impossible standards in women’s magazines and advertising promised solutions on the basis of time-efficiencies and mechanically derived cleanliness in the adjacent pages. Ideas of domesticity were prominently displayed in the copy and advertisements found in women’s magazines.

The explicit take-aways from these advertisements are that women were the primary caretakers of the household. To many people in the postwar period, cooking was a woman’s job. It was a task that women were responsible for, along with other household chores such as cleaning, running errands, and taking care of the children. These tasks kept women focused on maintaining the family’s residence and children and out of the paid workforce. The maintenance of her household was not singularly for the sake of her family’s well-being, but also as a signal of the family’s status. In the new suburban houses of the period that were more connected to the outdoors, through their employment of picture windows, back patios and front porches, the gaze of the neighbour into the domestic space was an important consideration. In the suburban home the interior space was newly open to the judgement of the community and was an indicator of social and economic status of the family, but especially impacted the perception of the female head of household as an adequate or inadequate caretaker.

With the advent of convenience foods later in the decade, initially marketed for the time efficiencies they would provide these already largely over-worked women, came a new advertising technique: the corporate character. With these new convenience foods, which could easily be prepared without any specialized knowledge, advertisers actively decided to refrain from advertising this aspect of their product, in order not to upset the normative gender roles that were largely abided to in the 1950s. Instead these products were marketed as “secret” recipes, tips or tricks to the female consumer. This type of campaign required a human touch, and in that vein corporate characters were developed. These corporate characters, like Betty Crocker and Aunt Jemima were extremely developed and their brand associations persist today. It was necessary for these characters to be at once relatable and idealized and they were carefully designed to straddle this dichotomy and appeal to most people. These corporate characters were almost always white women, who were always pristine from their attire to demeanor to relaxed expressions and like the print advertisements that preceded them, demonstrated to women the standards they were expected to maintain in their households and that this work was meant to come naturally and easily to them.
ADVANCED CAPITALISM, CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION & CHANGES TO DOMESTIC LABOUR

The first half of the twentieth century had seen something of a revolution in housework as the paid servant, who was common in many upper and upper-middle-class houses between 1870 and 1910, was gradually replaced by the woman of the house doing all her own housework. This transition was accompanied by the introduction of many new appliances and tools such as clothes washers and vacuum cleaners. However, these time and labour saving appliances did not seem to have much effect on how much time women spent doing work. The advertising and institutional modes in which these new appliances were introduced and promoted represent one of the most comprehensive and intrusive advertising campaigns of the century.

What the suburb politically represented was in many ways the break from industrial capitalism to advanced capitalism, easily rationalized in an economy that was becoming more and more affluent. There was a political push for mass consumption that predated the postwar period, perhaps starting at an institutional level with Herbert Hoover’s Better Homes in America Commission, developed while he was Secretary of Commerce in the 1920s to encourage new homeowners to make material investments in their homes. Simultaneous with the efforts of Hoover’s commission, the advertising industry was quickly becoming more and more prominent and unequivocally capitalized on Hoover’s strategy by marketing to new homeowners. The suburban home became the setting in which every product was advertised. Every advertisement was inherently an advertisement for the suburban home and explanatory of the expectation of consumerism in this setting.

Consumerism after the Second World War was certainly prevalent with the inflated economy, but spending was not simply understood as a way of demonstrating economic status, it was also a way by which to show patriotism. Spending was understood as contributing to the ultimate success of the country’s economy. Keeping the economy at its inflated, postwar state was a priority for the majority of Americans who still remembered growing up during the Great Depression. “More, newer and better,” became a mantra for the middle class American, and demonstrated their support of their country.

No industry better appropriated this mantra than that of home goods. The women’s magazine was instrumental in all these introductions as it was where the images of ideal household were propagated. Not only did the image prescribe what ideal spaces looked like, they clearly showed the female head of household as responsible for all of them, all whilst in full-makeup and dressed in the latest fashions. In their content, these magazines set the ideals for the home and for the women of the era, which were individually impossible standards for the majority and in their combination a distant dream for most. It was next to these images that home goods were advertised. Nearly all advertisers used these ideals to their advantage, focusing on how their products, when used effectively eased the burden of housework, showing immaculate women in immaculate houses.

In 1954, the Kansas City Power & Light commission constructed The All-Electric House. The All-Electric House, was much like General Electric’s showcase home, built in 1931 that was occupied by Ronald Reagan and his family from 1957 to 1981 before moving into the White House. Both of these model homes, which looked as if modeled after the homes shown in the popular women’s magazines of the era, served to demonstrate to the average American consumer the incorporation of appliances into the home space. These technologies had a tremendous effect on housework. While in some ways they did in fact increase efficiencies in domestic work: refrigeration preserved food for longer, allowing fewer trips to the grocery stores and dishwashers cleaned dishes without active human labour. At the same time as these appliances were helpful, they also allowed for new tasks to be added into the domestic sphere. The domestic washing machine meant that laundry became a household task, rather than sending it out as was the common practice previously amongst middle class families. Most notably, the new cleaning technologies made it easier to clean things, but also provided a standard of cleanliness that was derived from a machine’s capability, like the dishwasher for instance. This new standard of cleanliness was not simply in the pages of a magazine, in was tangible in the individual domestic space and raised the standards for the entire household, adding a significant amount of work for the domestic labourer.

THE KITCHEN DEBATES

This new suburban housing evoked the architecture of the classical villa, making an ideological reference to a ‘simpler time’ before the rise of the industrial manufacturing city. The aesthetic reference to classical Greek (and in some cases Roman) architecture could also be read for the deeply political spaces (the public forums that are cited as the birthplaces of modern democracy) that exhibited the same architecture. The architecture of these suburban homes emphasized their status as the locus of Cold War politics – fought on the conflicting ideologies of advanced capitalism and communism.

This notion of the domestic space as central to the Cold War was emphasized when Vice-President Richard Nixon travelled to Moscow in 1959. He brought with him life-size models of homes that were quickly proliferating across the North American landscape. His conversation (perhaps ‘brawl’ would be a more appropriate term for what occurred between the two men) with Nikita Khrushchev, the President of the Soviet Union was at its root about capitalism, and took place in the kitchen of one of these model homes, which was the epitome of this mode of political economy.

For the event, Nixon had not only had these homes built, but had had all the American-made consumer goods and over seven tons of food shipped in to fully stock the homes. Prior to the debate taking place, American home economists, from companies like General Mills and General foods would conduct cooking demonstrations – much as they would in the United States, but instead with a focus on the cost reductions from appliances, packaged and pre-processed foods, which were completely foreign to Russia at the time and had still not reached the peak of their popularity in the United States. Though Soviet citizens were not allowed to eat any of the foods prepared in these cooking demonstrations (their government strictly forbade it), they attended these sessions in hoards – and staying for entire sessions that could take up to three hours.

Vice President Nixon showed Khrushchev around the model kitchen and all its amenities to explain the ways in which this new type of space made “life easier for women.” Khrushchev’s response immediately pointed to the fundamental difference in the attitudes that each world leader had: “This capitalist attitude towards women does not occur under Communism.” Nixon immediately countered, saying the sentiment (and promised benefits) were universal and added that even the Russian working class could afford these luxuries. For Khrushchev, this was not the point of contention, the problem was not the technology, but the technology’s implementation at a domestic (what he surely considered to be at a frivolous) scale. The natural effect of the capitalist democracy shaping the United States was that it constructed domestic labour and those who perform it (the female head of household, for example) to be pre-political and asocial. What started as a conversation couched in the rhetoric of new domestic technologies was unethered to directly address foundational differences in two disparate political economies that each treat the spaces of domesticity in radically different ways.

The debate was ultimately not one about the model homes (or more specifically the model kitchen) but rather the merits of capitalism against
those of communism. What is significant about this specific manifestation of this quite standard debate was that the merits were not being discussed in terms of power or wealth of the nation but rather on the basis of the standards of living of the masses. All this served to construct the kitchen, food and the modes in which it was prepared and consumed as the locus of the debate around capitalism. The kitchen was identified as central to the discussion around political economies – as it is a place that is both left out and deeply implicated in this sphere. Furthermore, the timing of this conversation makes it interesting – it directly preceded the beginning of the Second-wave Feminist movement in the United States. This discussion assigned agency to having creating domestic labour such that it was outside the scope of the economy and that whomever was meant to perform it was simply a slave to the rest of society. The Kitchen Debates, now infamous, marked one of the first times that advanced capitalism and the highly consumerist society that had become the status-quo in United States was criticized in such a public and accessible way for the American population. The agency was placed on social constructs that had been enforced and were now restricting in character, by government policy and the newly elevated status of capitalism in the country. The broadcast of the Kitchen Debates in the model kitchen in Moscow to televisions in the nearly identical kitchens of the American postwar suburban homes, while not necessarily creating American supporters for Communism, did certainly elevate Nixon’s profile and his vision of American domesticity in the United States through the television broadcast.
The Feminist Movement of the 1960s that continued well into the 1980s (often referred to as Second Wave Feminism as it followed in the steps of the Suffragettes’ cause) was in direct opposition to ideals of the American Dream regarding the role of women, which were propagated through the spaces of the North American Postwar suburb. The societal expectation of women marrying in their early twenties to then become full-time homemakers, caring for their husbands and children as their raison-d’être was put into question. Bearing slogans like “Wash Your Own Dishes,” “It’s In The Refrigerator” and “Personal is Political” this second wave of feminism was, arguably, less focused on political rights for women and more focused on changing the normative gender roles that had been embedded in American culture. What’s more is that this iteration of the feminist movement takes the domestic kitchen as its primary area of concern.

Though this new view of gender roles is relatively more widely accepted now, due to the work of these activists and a number of institutional, political and economic shifts in the United States specifically, the adoption of these ideals were not implemented without a struggle. Though many men were persuaded to join the cause, contributing to domestic labour many were not. Some men were inclined to desert their newly emancipated wives and families or divorce them. Furthermore, reported incidents of domestic violence and general violence against women, including rape and physical and emotional abuse increased significantly. Though this could simply be because of women, being empowered by the movement to report the incidents, it is also likely that conflicts were incited by new demands of women that changed the domestic setting, radically for the male head of household.

There was certainly resistance to the feminist project from men in the sixties. There was also notable opposition from women who did not believe in the oppression of their own condition. These women could largely be characterized as white and upper-middle class. Understandably so as these women had the resources to hire help either inside or outside of the household and spend money on appliances that eased the burden of domestic work. Though these women claimed to take pride in the work they performed for their husbands and children and believed it to be their biological task, their economic standing (or the economic standing of their husbands) allowed for their houses to be equipped with the most efficient appliances and paid help to be brought in, to ease the burden of housework. The drudgery of housework, or the perceived drudgery of housework, became that basis for women (and men) understanding gender-based oppression. The expectations of home-life and the housework required by the housewife to create and maintain said home-life created during the postwar years and propagated through narrative of the American Dream, became a key point to which feminists reacted. The domestic space was once again politically charged. The house, housework practices and familial hierarchies could all be read for involvement in the feminist project and the feminist project operated within this same domain to mark the liberation of women in the 1960s.

WOMEN LEAVING THE KITCHEN

The American Dream’s depiction of the postwar suburb as a female space was primarily read through the normative role of the female head of household as a (unpaid) domestic labourer and hence her association with the home-space. The urban space and the economic realm was likewise characterized as a male space in which there were a number of institutional and social barriers placed on women’s participation. This understanding of gender roles and gendered spaces continued to have relevance during the 1960s and was a principal social tenet challenged by Second-Wave feminists in their attempt to reshape the American social imaginary.

The physical separation of the household space from public space and the separation of the domestic economy from the political economy (which was paid and socially and politically governed by labour laws, unions, etc.) were both challenged by the movement. Though women had certainly been working outside of the home during and before the Second World War, the commonly held belief in the United States was that the place of women is in the home (which is still commonly heard today). The general economic prosperity after the Second World War, gave the postwar period its strong identification with this notion of women staying at home, as middle-class families were able to meet their needs and maintain their lifestyle on a single pay cheque. The male head of household was, in the postwar years, the only wage-earner in this family and his wife’s working full-time as a housewife was seen not only as a marker of social status, indicating her husband’s ability to care for his family and his standing the social and political, economic sphere but also as seen as a moral decision. If a family had the financial capacity to have a single wage-earner, then it was considered immoral and irresponsible for a woman to leave her children with a ‘stranger’ (likely some sort of paid domestic labourer: a maid, nanny or the like).

Second Wave Feminism challenged this culturally held value with its activism. Core points on the movement’s agenda were regarding the economic characterization of domestic labour and were addressed variably by feminists based on political beliefs. The utopian models forwarded by designers looking to empower women in the urban form were largely left-leaning, adopting socialist modes of housing to ease the individual burden on domestic work and to socialize it. While the utopian models represent an important mode by which to analyze the values held by the movement, the economic climate of the 1970s affected a significant change in the work of women, feminists and otherwise. The economic climate of the 1970s was radically different than in the early postwar years. The two-wage earner family became the norm. This condition, of the female head of household participating in the economic realm and the values put forth by feminist media, lead to the characterization of the female wage-earner as a “Superwoman,” as domestic labour largely remained her responsibility. Even with the progress made by women in the public sphere of the workplace (largely due to economic necessity, more than a real shift toward gender-equality), women made little progress in the private sphere, where it was still socially held that they be the primary nurturers of their children and care for their husbands.

CONVENIENT OR NUTRITIOUS?

The growing number of women working outside the home affected the popularity of convenience foods. Convenience foods were new in the 1950s, having developed from adoption of industrial, assembly-line technologies developed during the Second World War for the militarized production of food rations. Though women could easily be characterized as initially suspicious of the newly processed and differently packaged food products available, in the early 1950s it became apparent that convenience food was here to stay. With the changes to the economy in North America, shortly after the inflation experienced after the War that created a norm of two-wage earner families, without a twenty-four hour per day, dedicated domestic labourer, convenience foods became necessary in order to lessen the burden of food preparation for the woman of the house who was working full-time outside of the household.

The advent and popularity of frozen foods is one of the success stories of the postwar period. Prior to frozen foods being readily available, canned foods had been prevalent in the country for about a century. While the long-lasting popularity of canned foods provided food manufacturers with the reassurance that preserved foods worked for the American consumer, the frozen food market differed in that it required the consumer to already be in possession of a freezer where these food product could be stored. The prosperity enjoyed by middle-class families after the end of the Second World War, and the advances in refrigeration technologies and the efficiencies in manufacturing and production processes developed during the war effort, made domestic refrigerators affordable, reliable and available to a large portion of the American population.


Better still, most of the new suburban homes built during this time came already equipped with a refrigerator/freezer, which allowed builders to cheaply provide them as they would buy in bulk and their inclusion in the home-package would add a premium to the price of the house. With the American house and supermarket equipped to store this new type of product, newly constituted channels for frozen food distribution (refrigerated trucks and warehouses) and the new need for convenience food products, the frozen food industry grew quickly. In the first decade of its existence, the industry was employing over 150,000 people in the United States.3 was continuing to grow exponentially and was the first industry that worked to broaden the traditional practices of food preparation and tastes of the masses.

The success of the frozen food industry, which was marketed exclusively to women (homemakers and professionals alike)4 for its convenience, its speed and ease of preparation, its cost efficiency and its comparable quality to the homemade versions of the same goods, opened up an entirely new faction of food product in the postwar years: convenience foods. While frozen foods occupied this category exclusively for some time (unless we include canned foods), dried processed foods quickly caught up. This category included products like ready-mixes, dehydrated foods and the like. These foods were certainly advertised by their producers, but they were likewise featured in cookbooks, reviewed by food writers, and featured in women’s magazines. Convenience foods, in the years following the Second World War, were not stigmatized as they are today, but were instead considered to be en vogue and were largely celebrated in popular culture.

McDonald’s was the first hamburger chain and opened in Des Plaines, Illinois in 1955. The suburban outlet which was quickly franchised, took the same concept and applied as the convenience foods available in supermarkets and applied it in the service industry. The company’s popularity was due to the fact that, no matter the location, all McDonald’s were essentially the same, and the golden arches were a hallmark of dependability in the years when the quality of roadside food varied widely.

Consumption of carbohydrates dropped while proteins and overall Americans spent more money on food that they had previously. Much of this is because they were willing to spend more for processed foods. The processed foods saved time, and they were sometimes a better bargain than fresh foods, as some frozen foods, like vegetables, had already been chopped and inedible parts of the plant had been discarded. While these convenience foods dominated the market-place and popular culture, nutritionists were beginning to rethink the New Nutrition doctrine that was based on the categorization of foods into carbohydrates, proteins and fats and the balancing of these three food categories as the key to a healthy diet. New Nutrition was the mode of thought that was prevalent since the beginning of the twentieth century, and the logic by which rationing had been distributed during the World Wars and was advertised during the Great Depression to keep Americans on a balanced, though meager diet during times of economic hardship. Towards the end of the Second World War nutritionists began expanding the three food groups to segregate fruits, vegetables, dairy and meat in a system called the Basic Seven, which Harvey Levenstein describes as ‘Newer Nutrition’.5 The diet that was prescribed by this new categorization of foods was to eat from each of the seven food groups in a balanced fashion. What was not accounted in this guide for food consumption was the categorization of the new food products. It was understood that the foods that did not fit into this categorization, could be consumed freely. Though not necessarily problematic during the postwar years, when Americans were in greater danger of not getting enough food rather than consuming too much, many of these new processed foods were higher in calories and fat content than the foods they were replacing the typical American diet.

Newer Nutrition and the Basic Seven was accompanied with another newly established logic that would govern food consumption in North America during the fifties: vitamins and minerals. With the new ability to measure the vitamin and mineral content in foods and having linked their presence to good health, came a new category of food product: the health food. Unlike the natural or slow food movements that dominate the health food market, today, the health foods of the postwar era, were basic foods that were ‘fortified’ with added vitamins and minerals. While these foods were immensely popular and generally understood as on the opposite side of the spectrum as the also prevalent processed convenience foods - both foods were representative of a single trend: added efficiency in domestic food preparation. While convenience foods largely looked to speed and ease of preparation, its cost efficiency and its comparable quality to the homemade versions of the same goods, opened up an entirely new faction of food product in the postwar years: convenience foods. While frozen foods occupied this category exclusively for some time (unless we include canned foods), dried processed foods quickly caught up. This category included products like ready-mixes, dehydrated foods and the like. These foods were certainly advertised by their producers, but they were likewise featured in cookbooks, reviewed by food writers, and featured in women’s magazines. Convenience foods, in the years following the Second World War, were not stigmatized as they are today, but were instead considered to be en vogue and were largely celebrated in popular culture.

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The new food products introduced in the years immediately following the Second World War were made to be convenient, quick and efficient. This meal by opening a number of cans and mixing them together was not only viewed positively, but was thought to be more in fashion, more modern, foods - both foods were representative of a single trend: added efficiency in domestic food preparation. While convenience foods largely looked to these foods were immensely popular and generally understood as on the opposite side of the spectrum as the also prevalent processed convenience foods - both foods were representative of a single trend: added efficiency in domestic food preparation. While convenience foods largely looked to these foods were immensely popular and generally understood as on the opposite side of the spectrum as the also prevalent processed convenience foods - both foods were representative of a single trend: added efficiency in domestic food preparation. While convenience foods largely looked to speed and ease of preparation, its cost efficiency and its comparable quality to the homemade versions of the same goods, opened up an entirely new faction of food product in the postwar years: convenience foods. While frozen foods occupied this category exclusively for some time (unless we include canned foods), dried processed foods quickly caught up. This category included products like ready-mixes, dehydrated foods and the like. These foods were certainly advertised by their producers, but they were likewise featured in cookbooks, reviewed by food writers, and featured in women’s magazines. Convenience foods, in the years following the Second World War, were not stigmatized as they are today, but were instead considered to be en vogue and were largely celebrated in popular culture.

CHANGES TO NORTH AMERICAN FOOD CULTURE

Along with new food products, the period between the end of World War II and the early 1960s saw major changes in food distribution. The suburban supermarket fundamentally changed the relationship middle class Americans occupying these spaces had with food, food producers and food sellers. The urban grocery stores that were popular up until the 1950s, were much smaller than the new grocers and due to their size restrictions tended to cater to a specific (generally hyper-local) demographic and maintain working relationships with only a few suppliers. It was typical for these grocers to be located proximate to one another, with grocers stocking food products from the same suppliers avoiding colocate. This created a culture that shopped around to meet their households’ food-needs, looking for the best price or simply a preferred product. The limitation of space in the small urban grocers meant that food products were stocked in small quantities, such that the shopkeeper could sell the product before it expired. The lack of preservation techniques to elongate shelf-life in the store or at meant that most households shopped for food on a daily basis.

All this changed significantly when people moved from urban centers to the suburbs. To service the suburbanites’ food needs, suburban supermarkets were developed. These supermarkets were massive when compared to their urban predecessors; their increased square-footage meant that greatly increased shelf-space. This extra space can had a considerable impact on the number of new products - both fresh products and packaged products - that were introduced during the time and the new sizes of food products. Family-size products were introduced in the suburban grocery store, and were immediately popular with consumers coming in via car as they could easily transport the large item in their vehicle and it allowed for fewer trips to the store, which was now further from the household. New packaging types for single-portioned food and food products also represented a significant change from the urban grocer to the suburban supermarket, in that the consumer was able to exercise choice independently, pulling items from shelves, instead of asking a store clerk to portion the desired quantity from the bulk storage. In 1936, he Raymond Lowry Corporation issued a report defining this new supermarket in both tangible terms but also the way in which its role in the American marketplace was different from its predecessor. The supermarket was defined as a store with “separate departments for produce, meat, etc. ... [that] emphasized self-service and clearly marked prices of their stock. ... The supermarket has
While the urban grocer declined rapidly in the early 1950s, independent supermarkets generally held their own against chain supermarkets in the postwar years until consolidation in the industry that the top fifteen chains took in thirty cents of every food dollar spent by 1956. These chains were able to exert this influence on the entire food industry, creating a power imbalance. While the consumer-producer relationship is always complex, when it came to the food industry in the postwar era, this relationship became especially pernicious. While consumers were given infinitely more product options in the suburban supermarkets than they had had previously, there were very few companies controlling the manufacturing of food, which allowed producers to set the terms of the relationship. This dynamic was described as the Food Hourglass, where there were millions of government-incentivized farmers producing raw materials in American whose products went to a small number of food processors, who in some way changed the food from its natural state, which then went to a larger number of wholesale distributors, and from there to hundreds of thousands of supermarkets across the country, where the consumer would come into contact with the product for purchase.

The food commodity business was and continues to be a cut-rate business in the United States. It is the industry that sees the greatest reward for producing the cheapest product. By adding some processing a company could make a product that was different from its competitors, had more value in the consumer’s eyes (which meant higher profit margin), and was new and modern (a plus for marketing). By the postwar years, “new” had become synonymous for “processed” when it came to describing food. From the consumer’s point of view, these new products often seemed like a godsend. For many people the new suburban home, with its appliances meant for the first time, that they did not have to deal with delivery men and they could purchase their food - a standardized product, which would be dependably stocked in a store rather than make it at home. Their appeal, however, was as much for its convenience as it was for the newness and novelty of the product. The postwar period represented the point in history where food became more than a necessity and was developed by corporations to be a commodity and appropriated by consumers to be a status symbol.

The consumer was able to exercise choice, independently (if we don’t consider the influence of product advertisement and societal pressures) and had their power acknowledged by food manufacturers who were spending millions of dollars doing market research trying to figure out what the average consumer would respond to, even if their consumerist-role is not present in the description of the food hourglass. While the sheer number of choices available to consumers could easily result in indecision and confusion, the consumer could and certainly did reject some of the products that were introduced in supermarkets following the War (like frozen milk, for instance) but in the suburbs food came from the grocery store. There were no other options of places to buy food in the suburbs, save the few restaurants that located in these spaces. While a household retained the possibility of buying only non-processed foods at the supermarket and making every meal from scratch, it was time consuming and not glorified in the way it is today, this was instead seen as primitive, needlessly strenuous and associated with the poverty experienced during the Great Depression and Second World War.

Food was political at domestic and at national levels. While most countries around the world were not experiencing food shortages following the Second World War, America was not. Food and the general economic climate became the source of American pride and foundational to the idea of American exceptionalism that has been key to national and international perception of American identity since the 1930s. General prosperity also affected the foods suburbanites ate. They spent more money on processed foods, choosing to pay a higher price for food that could be prepared quickly. The median expenditure per household went from $17 per week in 1946 to $20 per in 1955.

This trend in food expenditures was directly in opposition to Engel’s Law, an economic principle which says that as incomes rises the percentage of income spent on food falls. People spent a greater portion of their income on foods than then had before the Great Depression, even with their incomes having exponentially risen. While a series of surveys conducted in 1951 demonstrated that most Americans were “annoyed” with high food bills, their expenditures on new foods continued to rise. With raw ingredients having actually become cheaper in the postwar period and food portions having only minimally increased, it can be assumed that the added expenditures were on the modern convenience foods.

Even while women were increasingly entering the workforce, and men were beginning to participate in grocery shopping, the food industry still advertised exclusively to women. More than just food consumption, all domestic consumerism was specifically female. In the rhetoric of postwar America that defined itself through direct opposition to Communist values and moved from industrial capitalism to advanced capitalism, consumerism (and ‘conspicuous consumerism’) was a patriotic act, which was understood to be as important as voting. The new food product defined the economic status of the household and food purchase defined the woman’s role as mediating the political and economic sphere within the domestic space.

**Feminist Responses to Domestic Labour Practices**

Popular understanding of feminist activism is of the primary causes that have been taken on by feminist activists. The Suffragette movement is simplified to be about women’s voting rights and Second Wave feminism is often, inaccurately, reduced to being about women entering the workforce. Both of these movements touched on several aspects of femininity (especially Second-Wave feminism). Domestic labour practices have been addressed variably in both movements, and outside of feminist activism due to its fundamental implication in daily life.

**Feminist Designs for Utopia**

While academics have been known to treat utopias as irrelevant and naïve fantasies, as both delusional and escapist amusements, utopian designs and literature are important historical artefacts, as they allow an understanding of what was (at least by the author) deemed to be ideal. Utopian work is necessarily reactionary to the actual conditions in which it is formed and has been since the first known instance of this mode of thought, in Thomas More’ Utopia. Utopian modes of thought are especially relevant to the subject of urban settlement, as their designs almost always deal with housing, not necessarily as architectural but as the mediating element between the social and individual (the most utopian designs do not even distinguish between the two - as in the perfect setting, the individual and the social are completely in unison).

Feminism as a concept has been interpreted multiply since its founding. As such, the utopian designs put forth by self-proclaimed feminists have been diverse, to say the least, but provide a basis by which to analyze different ideals when it comes the role of the woman in society by the author’s treatment of domestic labour (the modes in which it is expected to be completed and to whom he/she assigns the task). The earliest of these designs was Catherine Beecher’s, who was designing the earliest suburban homes at the same time. Still operating as a feminist architect, Beecher designed the Haven Strategy as a strategy for designing homes to facilitate the woman in society by the author’s treatment of domestic labour (the modes in which it is expected to be completed and to whom he/she assigns the task). The earliest of these designs was Catherine Beecher’s, who was designing the earliest suburban homes at the same time. Still operating as a feminist architect, Beecher designed the Haven Strategy as a strategy for designing homes to facilitate domestic labour. This ideal household, in line with the goals of early European functionalist architecture, was essentially the house as a machine for domestic work. The house was an isolated cottage in a natural landscape that was equipped with the latest appliances such that housekeeping could be done as efficiently and as quickly as possible. The goal of this design was to allow the female homemaker to...
perform her “biological task” of nurturing her husband and children, which could then be the bulk of her work. This idealized model, furthered Beecher’s goal for the woman to head the private sphere - which was believed by Beecher and her followers to be a biological task. This mode, regardless of the problems it creates by operating under this guiding principle, where the woman, though in charge of the private sphere is dedicated entirely to her husband and children, does not allow for a solution for those who are unable to afford the latest appliances, or even a suburban cottage outside of the poor living conditions of the urban setting.

Developed alongside Beecher’s Haven Strategy was August Bebel’s Industrial Strategy, which conceptually disregarded any understanding of them being any singular, personal quality necessary to a household. As in the Marxist tradition, the Industrial Strategy made the factory the location of what was traditionally understood as household labour. Women would be employed in these factories, such that they were still tied to the traditional labour of home, but it was simply displaced to the factory and non-specific to any particular household. The more fundamental difference and the feminist slant of this model is that women would be paid for their labour. Bebel imagined that the housing that would exist alongside his new “housework industry” would be large multi-family apartment complexes. While Bebel understood that to facilitate this two-wage earner family that these apartments would need to contain amenities like child care, mess halls, recreation halls, etc. he, perhaps, overlooked the necessity of these services to be provided and staffed all-day, everyday which essentially recreates the traditional situation just displaced from the home space.

The intermediate ground between Bebel and Beecher’s strategies was the Neighbourhood Strategy conceived by a group of American material feminists, led by Melpson Fay Peirce. These material feminists believed that domestic labour was the work of women, but also believed it to be the most important form of labour and as such demanded a fitting wage - or at least half of the household income. Though domestic work remained specific to the household, domestic work cooperatives were developed within neighbourhoods, controlled by women to take advantage of aspects of the division of labour (such that every woman was not required to be a ‘jill-of-all-trades’ and that efficiencies could be increased) and to socialize domestic work, such that it wasn’t completely isolated in the private realm. Other utopian thinkers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, included some who aimed to empower women with their work, and others who simply envisioned an alternative to the present conditions and tackled the issue of food preparation directly in their writing and designs. Many envisioned a future where cooking was professionalized and citizens could grab dinner at healthy public kitchens. The project of communities of kitchenless homes underwent multiple iterations in the Postwar Era, but largely came to a conclusion of socializing domestic work, sometimes paid, sometimes unpaid. Beginning in the late 1800s through to the beginning of the Second World War, there were several experimental communities constructed at a number of different scales in the United States (following the European tradition) that aimed to socialized housework. The homes in these communities did not have private kitchens, nor did they have personal facilities for laundry. Instead, the daily tasks of domestic labour were housed outside of the home, in specialized facilities around which these communities were built. While it is unclear why these communities failed, or simply dismantled, they no longer began appear with the United States’ transition from an industrial capitalism to an advanced industrial capitalism. This shift in American ideology and economy was significant to the project of kitchenless-home communities, because these were understood as socialist projects (if not, Communist) which put them at odds with the prevalent organizing ideologies of the United States, and constructed those who participated in such communities (or “communes” as they were derogatorily termed) as threats to the American culture and way of life. While this was true, only in that their prevalence brought to question the values of ownership and the prioritizing of the household over the community that are foundational to the American Dream, they posed no real possibility of harm those who chose not to participate in their communities. Regardless, while this utopian project failed, the American Dream persisted and was institutionalized in the American postwar suburbs.

The, later, New Urbanism movement aimed to reform the suburbs of the Postwar Era in North America in order to allow for a fundamentally different way of life that valued dense, diverse and sustainable communities over isolated, uniform and consumer-based communities. The project was one of retrofitting the existing suburbs to these new ideals. According to the movement’s initial proponents, these new ideals were thought to be in line with the feminist activism of the 1970s and 1980s, and was understood as a mode of feminist activism. New Urbanism’s feminist slant was, at least initially, strong - not necessarily inherent to the ways in which the project was actualized, but instead in the opportunity the movement to present the normative lifestyles of suburban residents that had previously been held as the model for American life. This mode of thought, opened the conversation of lifestyle to its implications in housing and urbanism and a number feminist thinkers seized the opportunity to demonstrate their values in critiques of current urban forms and present alternate visions for urban life.

While a large number of suburbs were retrofitted/constructed in light of these feminist ideals found in New Urbanism, the primary critiques of the actual communities created by New Urbanism were that they did not bring the type of structural overhaul that feminist planning requires - as should be somewhat expected in a project of retrofitting. In comparison to the state of these suburbs, previously to New Urbanism’s interventions in them, these communities do lessen the burden of domestic labour as services are more easily accessible. Furthermore, since these communities lessen the dependence on the automobile, children are able to be more independent which provides another reduction in the hours required to maintain and nurture the household. Where these communities reproduce the same problems are in that domestic labour is essentially modeled in the same way, simply allowing easier access to certain services. An entirely new utopian project developed in the Postwar Era, though not a feminist utopia in its conception certainly provided a new model for domestic labour. Reyner Banham’s Infrastructure-less Community was entirely predicated on technological advancements that had not yet been made. Banham’s design eliminated any real residential subdivisions, the home was entirely mobile - essentially a futuristic caravan or mobile home. The entire home was moveable and more importantly, minimal. Technology solved the problems of domestic labour - the home did not require cleaning, just storage and the boundaries between the public space and the household were only ephemeral. As his intention was not necessarily one of feminism, the narrative of this new space did not account for family structures or who within the household was given control of this mobility. Even in this futuristic conception, it is easily conceivable that a non-wage earner is tied to the ‘domestic space’ regardless of its inherent mobility. In Reyner Banham’s scheme, ideas of mobility became implicated in the utopian project. While the overtone of his design was not feminist, it brought to light important aspects of access in the feminist project, and pointed out the lack of unbridled access in the suburban space, even when it was mitigated by the automobile. The issues of mobility and access that segregated domestic space from urban space led to a strict gendering of the city that reproduced issues of mobility and access but also normative gender roles for years.

REREADING THE CITY AS GENDER NEUTRAL

The urban form of the Postwar American is easily read as gendered through the normative gender roles produced by the American Dream: the male as wage-earner in public sphere and the female as labourer in the private sphere of the dwelling. As these two spheres
were physically separated in the planning of the suburbs, essentially separating and isolating housing and the domestic from the public. The urban dichotomy of city and suburb was easily aligned with the gender dichotomy of male and female.

There was a third space in the Postwar era that is arguably as important to understanding the urban form that characterized the time period: the personal vehicle. Car ownership was essential to access any of the services necessary to operating in the isolated households of the Postwar suburb. As the car was necessary, constructed as such through the design of the suburban, to performing any activity associated with the ideal lifestyle presented by the American Dream whether it was going to the city to work or to run the errands that made it possible to perform household work. As such, the personal vehicle became a “third space.” Beatriz Colomina reads this third space as being an interstitial space between the city and the suburb, which can likewise be read as space that is neither exclusively male nor female. This non-gendering of car space implicates it for the access to the public sphere it necessarily provides through mobility is implicated in the trichotomy of housing, gender roles and domestic labour. Car ownership increased greatly following the war. Car ownership was almost always required by suburban living, as the suburbs were usually sited near large roadways, but far from rail lines. With this change, the non-gendered car space became more and more prevalent and the majority of Americans became accustomed to this type of space during the postwar years.

This urban gendered-dichotomy progressively became more and more blurred with women moving steadily into the workforce. The ramifications of this are not only that they began to occupy the city, but that to maintain a household to the standards outlined by the American Dream, which remained prevalent, men necessarily had to start working in the domestic sphere. Though the male role in domestic food labour remained minimal, there are indications that men helped out with shopping for food, drying the dishes and though cooking largely remained a woman’s job through the 1960s and 1970s, outdoor grilling became more and more popular, which was the sole occasion when the preparation of the entrée was the man’s job (although the other food related jobs (including making other foods and cleaning up) were relegated to women). As normative gender roles began to blur, the American urban form could began to be reread as approaching increased gender neutrality, throughout.
The Back-To-The-City movement represents a movement in the type of residential settlements in North America that is thought to be symbolic of a paradigm shift in American culture, lifestyle and urbanity. Like the suburban movement of the postwar era, the Back-To-The-City movement does not represent a uniform or universal narrative, but it represents a trend that characterizes contemporary American culture and lifestyle. The movement of Americans back into the city would demonstrate a new ideal having affected at least some Americans in their choice to move to the city. It is, however, still uncertain whether the growth in urban populations actually represents a movement of suburbanites, or is an influx of immigrants or simply represents the domain of the population in their twenties, which is currently the largest of any faction of the American population. While in terms of demographics, the trend is not verifiable with statisticians being divided on what the numbers say, property prices are clearly in support of such a movement. The price per residential square foot in urban areas are exponentially more expensive than the price per residential square foot in suburban areas, and what’s more is that the upper and elite classes have largely purchased in and occupy urban areas as opposed to suburban ones. Furthermore, popular rhetoric, whether statistically significant or not, has certainly shifted its attention to cities as the sites of dwelling for Americans. For the sake of considering general trends, and understanding how the different mode of residential settlement changes domestic labour practices and has different implications for gender roles, I will accept the city as the new ideal space for American dwelling.

This movement to the city has been characterized by the movement of millennials, who grew up in the suburbs into urban cityscapes for the first time since the rapid development of the suburbs and the comprehensive ideology of the American Dream, over half a century ago. Though, like the Postwar era, the Back-To-The-City movement represents a complete departure from the practices that came before it, the city is not a tabula rasa: a blank slate on which to build. Rather the city has, since its abandonment by essentially anyone who could afford the move, developed in its own way, separately from the suburbs. In the Back-To-The-City movement, the question becomes how the American Dream is retrofitted to fit within the lifestyle provided by the city or how the city is retrofitted to fit an set of ideals that are specific to the suburbs. Whereas it would be expected that the Back-To-The-City movement was a movement incited by changing American ideals that values mobility and access for all the members of a household and dense, sustainable development, it does not seem that this has been the underlying cause of the movement. Conceptually, however, the Back-To-The-City movement offered the opportunity to create new normative lifestyle conditions through urban planning and design; to assure that the spaces that are being planned match contemporary American ideals regarding lifestyle, domestic labour and gender roles rather than simply assigning them based on the ideal image that was presented to Americans over 50 years ago.

### HOUSING TYPES FOR THE NEW URBAN POPULATION

The Back-to-The-City movement has meant that affluence is returning to urban areas, from the American suburbs. While it is largely the middle class through which this movement has been described, the middle class certainly does not exist in the way it did following the Second World War. With ever growing income disparity, made central to American discourse in the 2009, Occupy Movement. All this to say that the movement into cities, was likely an upper-middle, if not an elite class movement. The size of the housing that these classes occupy in the urban setting, is much smaller than those they resided in in the suburbs. This is naturally because of the density of city spaces, that leads to the development of apartment towers, rather than single-family homes, and the cost per square foot in urban spaces is, likewise due to the density of demand, much higher. Furthermore, this movement did not initially see the construction of a new housing stock. The outflow of the population into the suburbs following the Second World War saw a slowing of construction and investment in building in the city. Much of the housing stock that exists in the city was that which was constructed previously to the War. This housing unlike the housing stock of the postwar suburbs was built to last, and continues to be usable with only minor structural upgrades, although technological upgrades were more significant. Even with upgrades to home technologies the layout of these homes differed from the suburban housing in that the kitchen was the isolated space, separated from living spaces, to delineate the space of the domestic servant from the family.

While new housing for the city has in fact been developed, much of it is geared towards the most elite of socio-economic classes (the 1% of the population, so to speak) and their housing doesn’t necessarily reflect their living conditions (paid domestic workers and the general exporting of their domestic work is made possible by the numerous services available in urban settings), the treatment of their homes reflect American held ideals for lifestyle, as perceived by real estate developers who in North America cumulatively spend millions of dollars annually conducting market research. Upon analyzing the floor plans of the most illustrious, recent condominium developments in New York City, it can be seen that while the floorplans of these units are much larger than those in the prewar buildings, there is a smaller disparity between the sizes of the kitchens than exists between the other living spaces. Likewise, even in the open-plan designs of these new designs, which follow in the tradition of open-plan living developed in the postwar suburban homes, kitchens are more often than not not found to be located in a corner, rather than central to the home. While this is in part due to the efficiency of clustering the rooms that require plumbing (kitchen, bathroom and laundry rooms) there are certainly alternative arrangements that privilege the kitchen space and facilitate the mechanical systems - especially at the premium for which these units are sold.

Developers also seek to raise the price of their units by including a number of building amenities. These amenities include spaces designated for ‘parties and formal dining’ and services ‘catering kitchens and in-house maid and catering services.’ Food-work and socialization around food that previously took place in the household, specifically around the kitchen in postwar suburb (or on the back patio) or in the formal dining room in the times preceding the Second World War have in these idealized living conditions, been moved outside of living spaces.

Furthermore, these new unit types, at the very top of the real estate market are also marked by another important trend that affects the usage of this the (re-)excluded kitchen space. A number of high-end developers in cities (notably New York City and Chicago) have developed mixed residential and hotel towers. As a development strategy, it is a sound model as the hotel services can be extended to service the condominiums that make them more attractive (and more expensive). Even more so than in the prewar housing units that isolate the kitchen and hence its labourer, making it increasingly difficult for the preparer of meals from simultaneously performing a social/nurturing role in the household, these luxury units entirely remove the domestic labourer from the household, making domestic labour and domestic space mutually exclusive, for those who can afford it. In increasingly economically stratified cities, gender roles are highly dependent on economic attainment, which has come to define how people are able to allocate their time, their access to resources and fundamentally shapes the way people live and their capacity to live according to their beliefs and values about lifestyle, domesticity and residential location.

### URBAN FOOD PRACTICES

Both the old (prewar) and new (post-postwar suburb) urban housing stock, turn away from the kitchen space. Whether this lessen importance of the kitchen is in terms of the prewar kitchen following in the tradition of kitchens that were the domain of domestic servants, who were to be kept separate from the family or the new types of luxury housing that have a significantly smaller kitchen area to house area ratio than existed in postwar suburban homes and further moves the kitchen space into a corner, such that it is a service space to the formal dining room, rather than...
it being central to the residential plan. Both these housing tropes, while different in many ways, show that the pull of Americans back to cities and the developments that have been made in these spaces, that have been unrestrained by economic considerations and have come to represent the ideal domestic settings. While these luxury developments are generally staffed with extensive, on-call concierge services, that perform most, if not all of the domestic labour for those who are able to afford it, the average urban dwelling has, recently been offered more and more options by which to similarly export all sorts of domestic labour, from being within the household to outside.

The most monumental trends of the past few years in not only food consumerism, but consumerism in general have been in developing models by which to move the food consumerism and production outside of the domestic space. While there have always almost always been restaurants that allowed for food consumption outside of the domestic space, the control of what is being consumed, its preparation, its source, not to mention any control the setting and/or ambiance is lost. Restaurants, while growing in importance in North American food culture, have never and still do not hold the same associations with the American Dream narrative as home-cooked foods. With the high costs of city-living and the general requirement for most households to have two-wage earners, time for food preparation, at home is very limited, and the positioning of the kitchen in urban dwellings makes it difficult to multi-task other household chores or interact with family members from that space, as either male or female, preparing meals. Furthermore, the new, popular understanding of healthy eating, excludes the processed foods of the postwar era, which were previously used to deal with the limitations of time of working mothers. To contend with this disparity in time spent on domestic labour as shopping is done quickly online and with same-day delivery options provides a greater convenience than going to grocery stores. With the urban household, this is also an economical option as it allows them to purchase food items in bulk, which would not be transportable by foot.7 One step further than grocery delivery services are the new and quickly growing recipe delivery services. Recipe delivery services allow the consumer to choose the meal they want to prepare at home, based on nutritional values and dietary restrictions and deliver the quantified, but not processed ingredients to one’s household in a matter of hours, with the step-by-step instructions on how to prepare the meal. This service comes at a price, depending on the meal, but is affordable compared to eating a similar meal in a restaurant and only slightly more expensive than simply buying ingredients from the grocery store, which come in quantities that do not necessarily correspond to specific meal preparations and it saves time in grocery shopping and food preparation. While this remains somewhat niche, and is a service that is only available in a few major American cities, it provides the most time efficient way in which to prepare ‘home-cooked’ meals, which responds to the urban typography of kitchens, the reduced time people have to spend on domestic labour and the growing concerns with food in North American culture.

WORKPLACE FEMINISM

The popular rhetoric of Second Wave feminists was based in the movement of women out of the household. The implied message of leaving the household (and the arena in which much of their political lobbying took place) was in allowing women to join the workforce. These feminists worked to change the social held standards that prevented women from entering the workforce and later feminists who had successfully navigated entering the workforce, then focused their activism on the conditions of this once, exclusively male space for women. This movement of workplace feminism began in as early as the 1960s and remains a prevalent issue today, in this movement’s intersection with the Back-to-the-City Movement.

In 2012, 57% of American women were employed in country, holding 46% of all jobs in the United States.8 As Lana Nino concludes in Women: Feminism, Sexuality, and Equality in the Work Place: there is no turning back now.9 The country’s economy could not function if nearly half of its workforce left to stay at home to care for their families full-time. The initial movement to make the work place accessible to women, turned into activism making the workplace sensitive to women. Much of the work of Third Wave Feminist activists was to transform the workplace into an environment where women could thrive, alongside men.10 The goal was to have women’s achievements understood as achievements – not women’s achievements. While this view has long been institutionalized with the implementation of federal policies like the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 and the Equal Pay Act of 1963, the noticeable change in the beliefs and behaviours of the majority to reflect this value of gender equality in the workplace have only recently begun to take hold, and still remained somewhat underdeveloped. This top-down implementation of gender-equality in the workplace, while defining the rules and marking clear boundaries of what is considered appropriate, can only incrementally change attitudes, regardless of an immediate adherence to the ‘rules’.

These top-down policies were focused on the ability of women to participate in the workplace in a manner that was equal to men’s ability, but did not and still does not fully account for the domestic realm and the labour it required to maintain this sphere. When the workplace was occupied exclusively by men (and occasionally by single women), it was assumed that there was a woman at home to care for the home and children. This logic obviously becomes flawed when the woman now coexists at work (and in the city). While food services have recognized this incompatibility of the workplace and the home space as an opportunity to capitalize by offering convenience, it goes largely unrecognized by policymakers and is left to employers and employees to reconcile. The argument that has effectively halted political intervention is that which outlines equality between men and women and claims that biological difference cannot necessitate difference treatment, as the lack of difference was the crux of workplace feminism in its initial stages. This line of argument has even fragmented feminist activism in two camps: Equality Feminists and Difference Feminists. Equality Feminists are those who believe in equal treatment of men and women, regardless of any previous difference in treatments and expectations that create any disadvantage and Difference Feminists are those who believe in protective and favourable legislations for women in the workplace, due to how they had historically been treated in that space. The worry of some Equality Feminists is that the institution of protective and favourable legislation would provide employers with the justification to avoid hiring women altogether, as it would be more costly for them. The issue at this point in time, from the perspective of the domestic space, is that neither male employees nor female employees, collectivity or individually, are able to dedicate the time that the archetypal postwar housewife could. The ideals of domestic space and the essential necessities of the domestic life, become nearly impossible when the heads of households are both required to take on full-time, paid work. Women’s required participation in the workforce, both for individual need and the collective good, is all while they continue to face adversity in the workplace, a societal problem that was in part created by the conception of equality feminism which results in the treating of both male and female employees as male employees were treated in the 1950s. This becomes problematic in that the conditions of the home space today is radically different than it was 60 years ago when it was reasonable to assume that any married male in the workplace had a wife who was at home caring for the household. With the prevalence of the two-wage earner family, this male treatment of all employees serves to amplify and exaggerate the conflicts between the money and time required to maintain the home space as per the ideals outlined in the narrative of the American Dream that remains prevalent in the American social imaginary.
The Back-To-The-City movement and recent cultural norms in cities have been marked by a movement away from the kitchen. Reoccupying the city meant, for the middle-class, reoccupying prewar housing stock in which the kitchen was separated from other domestic spaces in the household, making it generally unappealing and incompatible with the image of the female head of household running the household from the kitchen space, at the center of the household. The new residences that the upper classes occupy in the city are decidedly different from the prewar urban residences and the suburban image propagated in the American Dream. The kitchen is not only separated from living space in these new, ideal dwellings, but all domestic labour is, though proximate to the dwelling, outside of it.

While this movement away from the kitchen has been prevalent in the two housing types (prewar and luxury housing, accepting the premise that those without financial restraints make housing and lifestyle choices that reflect collective ideals regarding both) included in this study that belong to the Back-To-The City movement and made possible by the density of services in the new urban setting for residences, trends in food culture (urban and otherwise) are dictating a movement back into the kitchen and traditional modes of food preparation.

FOOD AS THE CAUSE OF CRISIS

Food, in terms of its production, access and consumption has been linked to a number of problems in the contemporary world. While a universal problem, the United States’ relationship with food is of special concern because of the amount of land the country cultivates and the fact that food consumption per capita in the United States is higher than any other country in the world, and has been since the 1960s.1

Today it is widely known that the United States has an obesity problem of epidemic proportions. In 1990, obese adults made up less than 15 percent of the population in most U.S. states. By 2010, 36 states had obesity rates of 25 percent or higher, and 12 of those had obesity rates of 30 percent or higher.2 Today, nationwide, roughly two out of three U.S. adults are overweight or obese and one out of three is obese.3 While there are numerous causes for weight gain, and each individual case is decidedly different, food consumption is part of that. It is not just that the amount of food being consumed in the United States, it is the type of food being consumed. Much of the American diet consists of the processed foods that contain numerous additives and preservatives that were introduced in the postwar era. While Americans have certainly developed a taste for these foods, their relationship with health problems are well known. The dependence on these foods in the North American diet still does have to do with the efficiency that they offer, especially for families with two working parents. Furthermore, these foods, because of their automated production, use of cheap ingredients and ease of transportation and storage makes them easily affordable and occasionally the only affordable option.

The prevalence of these processed foods is also specific to the urban condition, into which there has been a recent movement. This urban space that has been reoccupied by the middle class is the same one, where urban grocers failed because of the impossible competition provided by the suburban supermarkets of the 1950s, which derived much of their market-edge from their suburban locations. With the movement back into cities, the population is found to be underserved by grocery stores and supermarkets like those found in the suburbs are nearly non-existent. Due to the infrastructure and size required by the supermarket that Americans had gotten used to in the suburbs in which much of the new urban population grew up, makes the development of these supermarkets in dense urban cities difficult, if not impossible. If supermarkets do become developed in these urban settings, to turn the same profits that they would in suburban settings with their added costs, they pass on additional costs to their customer, making comparable food products more expensive in urban centers than in the proximate settings. Whether an issue of affordability or of price these factors create urban food deserts and lead to a dependence on generally unhealthy, inexpensive processed foods.

The effects of the cut-rate food industry can be felt throughout the supply chain and create different problems at each point. While produce is not competitively prices with processed foods, when we take into account the preparation time for either, there has been a massive push to reduce the prices of agricultural products in the last fifty years. This, initially, meant more and more farmers giving up their work as they could not reap any or a significant profit and sold their fields to other farmers working nearby. Shortly after, the steep decline in the number of North American farmers, the farmers who continued to practice, had larger plots of land and more animals than they had had previously, and required significantly more labourers. When this began to pose a problem, the federal government began to invested in assembly line technologies that were used in the war to be adapted to ‘efficiently’ cultivate land and breed livestock. Pesticides and insecticides were developed alongside these technologies of automation and were widely used to keep crops healthy, while polluting groundwater, contaminating foods and contributing to global warming. After legislation was put in place banning certain farming practices that allowed farmers to turn more of each crop, they have begun to genetically modify all agricultural products, such that they are more resistant to climate change and pests. These new practices incited the Federal Food & Drug Administration to implement new categorization and required labeling of foods that are generally thought to be unprocessed. The produce and animal by-products that are actually unprocessed and are as you would have found them in the prewar period, now bear labels like ‘organic’ and ‘free range’ to differentiate them from comparable products in the supermarket. What becomes problematic is that these ‘natural’ foods are now nicher and bear a price tag that reflects that, once again making them unaffordable to the average consumer.

While food has been constructed to be at the root of significant problems both globally and in the United States, it seems like the blame is misplaced. The change to advanced capitalism and the current characterization of America as being firmly rooted in late capitalism does not allow for sustainable food practices when left to the free market. While food is being blamed for the state of climate change and American obesity, the blame should be placed on a lack of government intervention in this supply chain and leaving it the responsibility of the American consumer, largely still female shopping for her family to make decisions that are best for the health or her family, her country and the world, but puts her in a position where she has to work more in both the economic realm and in her own household.4

A NEW AMERICAN FOOD CULTURE VIA POLICY

The United States’ Food & Drug Administration (FDA) has, in the last twenty-five years began to actively take an interest in food not simply in terms of its contamination, but with its quality and implications of health for the American consumer. Previously to 1990, the FDA was involved with food regulation only insofar that food was consumable without the immediate risk of causing illness (like in its regulating pasteurization terms of its contamination, but with its quality and implications of health for the American consumer. Previously to 1990, the FDA was involved with food regulation only insofar that food was consumable without the immediate risk of causing illness (like in its regulating pasteurization

In 1990, the FDA introduced the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act (NLEA; Public Law 101-535). This law allows the FDA to require most foods which are regulated by the agency to not only label all nutrient content, but for all nutritional claims made by food to meet FDA regulations. This regulation was primarily made to draw awareness to the health implications of foods, especially those that are heavily processed and continue to make claims of being healthful for their vitamin contents that were popularized during the postwar period.5


3 Ibid.


5 Food & Drug Administration. “History.” http://www.fda.gov/AboutFDA/WhatWeDo/History/
The introduction of this regulatory practice was shortly followed by the United States’ Department of Agriculture publishing a Food Guide Pyramid in 1992, the first federal publication, in America describing best practices for personal food consumption since the wartime propaganda about food rationing in the 1940s. The Food Guide Pyramid, which has been re-issued twice since its initial publication, provides the first counterpoint to the Basic-7 rhetoric that was introduced in the postwar years. While the Basic-7 did not acknowledge processed foods, outright, its dictated nutrition through a uniform consumption of each of the food groups it outlined. And while processed foods are not one of these groups, the popular thinking on the subject of nutrition had been that processed foods could be consumed freely. The 1992 Food Guide Pyramid entirely negates this logic by dictating the maximum number of servings from each of its five food groups. This new dietary recommendation specifies that fats, oils, sugars and salts should be consumed only sparingly and with their content now clearly labelled on all processed foods, the Food Guide Pyramid served to essentially eliminate processed foods from the ideal, healthful, American diet.

**FOURTH-WAVE FEMINISM & RECLAIMING THE KITCHEN**

Though the discussion regarding feminist spaces is beginning to resurface in academia it is almost limited to the history of the project and at times a criticism of how the project has almost entirely dropped off the consciousness urban thinkers since the 1980s. Popular opinion seems to be that since, generally, gender roles assigned more fluidity than they were given in the Postwar era that the discussion no longer has relevance - as if the history of the project is no longer relevant to the understanding of the issues concerning food. Though the discussion regarding feminist spaces is beginning to resurface in academia it is almost limited to the history of the project and at times a criticism of how the project has almost entirely dropped off the consciousness urban thinkers since the 1980s.

**FIRST LADY MICHELLE OBAMA’S PUBLIC IMAGE**

Since 2008, Michelle Obama has been the first lady. For the nearly two years that she has been in this position, she has maintained her own agendas for political activism that complement her husband’s political priorities. While the Obamas’ time in the White House could be marked by a new focus on health, the President’s health care reform laws (The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, colloquially known as ObamaCare) and the first lady’s activism targeting the rapidly growing obesity rate in the United States, which has grown to the point of it being considered of epidemic-proportions (especially its effect on children) through the implementation of lunch and exercise programs in schools and awareness campaigns regarding both healthy food consumption and the importance maintaining an active lifestyle that includes exercise. While media outlets have reduced Michelle Obama’s time in White House to her “evangelizing exercise and good eating habits,” with the obesity rates still at an all time high, her work may have been a factor that influenced (or at least gave political backing to) new trends in American food culture.

Michelle Obama’s platform is far from radical at this point in time, when we are inundated with media regarding not only various interpretations of what constitutes a healthy lifestyle, but also media that constructs food as the central determinant of a healthy lifestyle. What is interesting and of particular relevance regarding the first lady of the United States of America’s platform is that she is a woman, in an extremely public position of power that has taken on food for the country’s citizenry as her priority.

Michelle Obama has been on the receiving end of all sorts of criticism for her (and her husband’s) politics, but has been especially targeted by self-proclaimed feminists. Starting with President Obama’s campaign trail where the Obamas had taken a clear stance on Michelle Obama’s involvement with the campaign and her political involvement following her husband’s election: that she was not expected to have any. When the Obamas were campaigning in 2008, the electorate was told that Mrs. Obama would primarily be taking care of her children. While a number of critics at the time declared this a political strategy to appeal to the socially conservative, who wanted to see a stereotypical, all-American family based on the gender and family norms generated in the postwar period in the White House, the Obamas followed through on this particular campaign promise.

Mrs. Obama has on more than one occasion referred to her most important work being as “mom-in-chief.” Even in her recent work for the North Star campaign that aims to make the United States the world leader for the percentage of young people it propels through post-secondary education, which will necessarily require passing new policies, her role has been primarily as a figurehead. Even as the public face of the campaign her media work has primarily revolved around her position as “mom-in-chief.” This has meant publicly lecturing high-school age children on the importance of completing their homework, speaking to kindergarten students about what they would like to be “when they grow up,” and speaking out to teen girls about their potentials in academics. While all decidedly important and likely influential roles, her work as first lady of the United States has been to nurture the country’s youth and her own children. Though certainly a reduction, children and their well-being has been Mrs. Obama’s primary platform in the nearly seven years she has been in office.

Michelle Obama’s advocacy platform is certainly important, but the importance of her work for the purposes of the current context of food culture and the state of feminism is that she has actively chosen to tie the two together in an extremely public way. The model she puts forth, as the first lady, is one that is considered ideal and more than ideal, an ideal held by the majority of the American constituents. As a highly educated and very powerful woman (and a Democrat) she was expected to be the most progressive first lady in the White House, but her shying away from influential policy work or even explicitly addressing issues and policies that specifically affect women (like abortion, maternity leave, etc.) has left the public to make assumptions about her stance on feminism based on the lifestyle she has chosen and chosen relative to her husband’s position. The healthy lifestyle touted by Michelle Obama and its provision for her entire family - and her undertaking to provide the same lifestyle for the entire country, and her understanding of this job as the her primary responsibility as “mom-in-chief,” is telling of the expectations for American women. Michelle Obama, a highly educated and extremely powerful woman, and one who is relatively socially progressive, is a notable example and perhaps an important influence in the current understanding of the societal role of females as experiencing a return to a number of values that existed at their most prevalent in the 1950s, following the Second World War. The woman, while not necessarily isolated in suburban space, is again charged with the task of nurturing her family. Today, as is the case with Michelle Obama, this role of care-giver and nurturer is not the only position deemed acceptable for a woman, but it remains expected that it is the primary concern, if not the only one.

The role of family (and national) nurturer is complicated by the new expectations for food preparation. Largely reactionary to a number of health and environmental ills that have reached epidemic proportions in recent history, the new modes of food consumption and preparation are even more time consuming than they were in the past. The development of new convenience technologies in the form of appliances, new processed foods and the newly and easily available prepared foods in the urban context, has instead of aiding lower the burden of domestic labour have been labelled as complicit in the food culture that has been blamed for a number of health-related and environmental problems, and are essentially blacklisted as tools that can be employed by the ideal nurturer of the family.

Michelle Obama’s Public Campaigning (2012 - 2014)
of males and females have produced a new acceptance of a number of diverse household-structures to be accepted by the masses. These, largely de-stigmatized, household types have their own struggles with domestic labour that are not standardly considered in the planning of contemporary communities. There remain seeds of the American Dream that American hold as ideal, even though they have expanded the breadth of what is accepted outside of that particular model.

Though recent feminist movements haven’t been particularly visible, there have been two notable movements in the United States since the 1970s. Third-Wave feminism directly followed Second-Wave feminism, in 1990s and further the same principles of gender equality in the workforce and attempted to redefine gender biases, but expanded its activism to queer women and women of colour that had, some felt, been excluded in the dominant rhetoric of the previous work of feminists. The current phase of feminist activism that has been termed Fourth-Wave feminism is still very new, to the point where it does not yet present a single cohesive narrative. It is defined primarily by its taking place on the Internet through independently run blogs and the like, which often present narratives that conflict with one another. If anything, at this point in time it can be said that Fourth-Wave feminism has largely opened up the scope of the issues dealt with by feminism. While this expanded scope is certainly important to the movement, a definite focus of the still fragmented movement is on domestic labour. The activists of this movement, largely react to the implications of Second and Third-Wave feminism in the domestic sphere, in their call for women to “reclaim the kitchen.”

This notion of ‘reclaiming the kitchen’ does not exist exclusively in the realm of feminist activism, it is likewise an agenda forwarded by health advocates, farmers, the Department of Agriculture and food enthusiasts. The feminist slant is different in that it focuses on the female head of household returning to the kitchen space. While most of the activists calling for this act of reappropriation are not calling for a return to the normative gender roles that though continue to persist, have changed, at least in terms of a woman’s place being in the household. While it is widely accepted, and to an extent expected in the current economic climate and the costs of city-living in the United States, that women are employed outside of the house. What these feminists are attempting to change is the defining women who work outside and inside the household as more than those who work solely in the household. They are essentially looking equal validation for homemakers and career women, wanting for one not to be characterized as a ‘superwoman’ and the other to have a single-track mind. Their goal is for it to widely understood that all women (and men for that matter) have the same number of hours per day, most of which are spent working either singularly inside or outside the domestic space or split between both realms.

The full-time homemaker (either male or female) is today expected to maintain the highest standards of cleanliness and physical, mental and emotional health of his or her family and with the economic climate and the costs of city-living, is expected to cut costs of the domestic operation. For the average single-income family, living in the city, this is likely to mean a dependence on cheap processed foods and/or long trips to suburban supermarkets. While two-wage earner, middle-class families sometimes have the option of using substitutes for domestic work to make up for the lost time while working in the paid sector by using hired help, using laundry services and the like, this is a luxury that is still unaffordable to most. Only for the upper-middle or elite classes support a family on a single-income and purchase whole, healthful foods to make every meal from scratch.
While historically, it has seemed that a uniform ideal type of residential settlement existed for the majority of the American population, today these ideals seem to be more fragmented than they have ever been in the past. Though ideals have not always been financially attainable for the majority, as one can begin to see with the Back-to-the-City movement, or other factors at play limited access to the preferred mode of housing (like red-lining barring African Americans from purchasing homes in early suburban developments) there has, until this point been a majority preference in types of housing in the United States. The contemporary relationships that Americans have with suburban housing and with the ideals coached within these various forms of dwelling are, at least, seemingly more complex.

While there has been a popular anti-suburb rhetoric in place since the Garden City movement attempted to combat urban sprawl in the 1930s, it was deemed of no consequence in the prevalent ideals and developments of the postwar era. Today, with the Back-to-The-City movement, it could be argued that the Garden City Movement’s rhetoric, along with that which was present throughout New Urbanism, have taken hold. But nearly as soon as the Back-to-the-City movement has become noticeable to the point of its statistical and anecdotal demonstration, a counter-narrative (also through statistics and anecdotes) has come to dominate popular literature on the topic. Popular media is looking at the same statistics about where millennials are choosing to settle and telling two opposing stories with through that data. While neither can be understood as the majority preference through their narration in media, it can be understood that both the Back-to-the-City movement and the Back-to-the-Suburb movement are influential in the contemporary social imaginary, regardless of either’s statistical legitimacy.

**MOVING MILLENNIALS**

Generation Y, the population cohort referred to as “millennials,” are those around which these narratives of Back-to-the-City and Back-to-the-Suburb are constructed. This generation, as the youngest with the agency to choose where they live, is naturally that to which the media looks to when discussing any trend in residential settlement, real estate and the like. Furthermore, this generation is an important indicator of trends in North America, not just for their age, but also because of their population. There are over 80 million millennials in the United States, which makes their generation slightly larger than the Baby Boomers and nearly 20% larger than Generation X. This means that they make up a quarter of the population of the United States, larger than any other single age cohort in America. The number of millennials in America is partially the cause of the ambiguity of the Back-to-The-City movement’s statistical and anecdotal prevalence. It is a common assumption of young adults (which is, today, synonymous with millennials who are between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five) to move to urban centers to pursue post-secondary education (the millennials more so than any other generation have keenly invested in human capital development) and for young professionals to remain in urban centers. The normative storyline outlined in the American Dream dictated that the young adult would remain in an urban center, renting his or her home until he or she has saved enough money for a down-payment on a house in the suburbs. While this ‘ending’ cannot currently be verified in practice, the fact that most postsecondary institutions and soft-skill work tends to locate in urban areas has created an influx of millennials into cities, regardless of changed values regarding housing.

A number studies surveying millennials in the last two years, have attempted to uncouch their actual values from their patterns of residential settlements. Most of these studies take as their primary interest the importance of homeownership to this generation, as there has been a noticeable decline in the rate of homeownership with this population cohort. It is common to hear about millennials valuing access over traditional homeownership, as being the crux of the success of companies who have been pioneering ways to institutionalize the sharing economy (companies like Airbnb and Uber, which have come to occupy their own discourse within the future of urban planning practices). While this seems to represent the popular rhetoric about the preferences of Generation Y, published surveys all seem to indicate the opposite motivation for this population’s ideal housing situation. In a 2010 survey conducted by Frank Magid & Associates, it was found that an overwhelming 82% of the American-millennial respondents believed that it was “important” for them to have the opportunity to own a home. And while this goal for homeownership in itself, could create a movement to the suburbs, with the prohibitive pricing of housing in urban areas a more recent survey of the same population conducted by the National Association of Home Builders in 2012 found that 90% of its respondents preferred suburbs or even more rural areas and only 10% preferred the urban core. According to this survey, the millennial-affinity for the suburbs is more than even that of their parents, the Baby Boomers.

While the surveys of this population cohort has been a useful method to understand preferences as disaggregated from actual manifestation, these surveys have not completely disaggregated the construction of this preference for the suburban lifestyle. In the postwar era, the suburbs were seen as preferable not just for their locational qualities and the lifestyle that was inherently implied by its spaces, but also for their affordability, as constructed simultaneously through the lessened costs on the supply side, the accessibility of financing plans for prospective buyers and the general economic inflation that created a middle class with the income put money down on homes. Today, suburbs, in general, continue to be the more “affordable” option for homeownership, in comparison with their urban counterparts. What remains unknown, even if survey results regarding locational preferences are accepted to be sound, is whether suburbs are preferred for what they represent in terms of lifestyle or for their being more compatible with the still common ambition for homeownership in the United States.

The Pew Research Center’s publication Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next outlines this generation’s incomes and potential to earn as being much less than previous generations’ while in their peak home-buying years (in which approximately half the millennial population is of an age that falls within the range). Both the employment levels and incomes of millennials are lower than that of this age group in that past. Not only are millennials earning less than older generations were at their age, but they are inexperienced with more student debt than any other generation had ever been. The average student loan debt for 25 year olds in the United States in 2013 was nearly $30,000 (USD) and that number is continuing to rise. 2013 represents the first time in the history of the United States that the percentage of 20 to 30 year olds with student loan debt had less ownership than those without student loans debt and both trends are continuing to become more and more exaggerated. Besides the grave expense of student loan debts that are unique to the living costs of Generation Y, during their being in what has been considered their peak home-buying years, the other expense that these millennials are faced with is the commodified food product. This commodified food product is that which is not only encouraged by practitioners in the health-care industry, but is forwarded in popular media as a status symbol and in political agendas as a moral mode of social and civic participation. The ‘right’ food product is the more expensive one. Food culture has been implicated in this commodification that requires additional resources from individuals in the form of food related expenses and preparation time. The inflated costs of the same food products in cities, as compared to in the suburbs creates an additional draw to the suburbs for millennials who already overburdened financially.

Regardless of this population cohort’s actual ability to actually finance either suburban or urban homeownership, every time they have been asked, they have overwhelmingly spoken to homeownership as an important personal ambition. The affordability crisis creates a condition in which homeownership is feasibly only a suburban condition and whether a Back-to-the-Suburb narrative is truly a matter of a preference for the suburban condition or simply a preference for homeownership.
CONSEQUENCES OF THE DREAM—THE GREAT RECESSSION

The Great Recession is often pointed to as the structural cause for the lower financial capacities of Generation Y. It was this population who completed post-secondary education, ready to enter the work force during years that were characterized by a dramatically depressed economy. This aspect of the millennial-narrative has been the culm of their lower incomes and higher student loan debts which make it such that an urban lifestyle, homeownership and “proper” diet have become seemingly incompatible due to the expense at which each comes.

It was, however, this fundamentally held value in homeownership in North America that created the Great Recession in the first place. The Great Recession, also called the sub-prime mortgage crisis was a by-product of the bursting of a highly inflated housing bubble in 2008. Though homeownership rates dropped slightly immediately following the bubble’s burst, they have been quickly recovering. More importantly than the actual rate of homeownership is the collective value placed on it. From the survey statistics describing millennial-preferences, homeownership is more valued today than in has been in the past. The very thing that millennials are seemingly aspiring to is the thing that has made it a condition that is largely inaccessible to them in any urban setting.

THE POSTWAR SUBURBS, AGAIN?

The suburbs into which millennials are allegedly moving, are the same ones that many of them grew up in. While the suburbs are not necessarily an alien condition to North American millennials, the departure is in the ages at which this cohort is populating this particular type of residential settlement. While this repopulating of the suburbs cannot be understood singularly through an American value in homeownership or even a consideration of lifestyle as indicated by living expenses, both certainly play a role in the decision that leads millennials back to the suburbs (or not to ever, leave for that matter). The morality that defines the suburban lifestyle is one about family-life and individual, pre-political righteousness, whereas living in densely populated areas has more recently been constructed to be the dwelling of the socially and politically conscious, through the rhetoric that has been in place since New Urbanism’s introduction in the late 1970s. While statistics have somewhat convincingly constructed both residential spaces as being newly valued by millennials, the suburban and urban conditions remain differentiated and defined by through their structural opposition. While these urban formations are understood as contradictory of one another, the locational choices of Americans cannot be understood in the same way (nor can they fully be understood on anything other than individual basis).

What can be discerned from the lifestyle implied by the suburban labour demand and domestic hierarchies is from the general mode in which the fetish-commodity food product is attained. The singular food product-type which has been constructed in popular, contemporary rhetoric is attained in the suburbs by imbusing it with work and time. Whereas the urban condition allows for a number of means to prepare and consume the appropriate foods by investing money (symbolically embodying time in the economic realm) the suburbs have lesser opportunities to substitute the actual time-investment in domestic food preparation through premium services.

With this understanding, that locating in the suburbs lends itself to a lifestyle that is constructed around the single-wage earner family and the archetypical postwar “stay-at-home mom,” out of the necessity to simultaneously provide financially and properly nurture a family. The typical suburban home has at its helm, as the space that mediates between the public and private realms: a exercise that requires time and effort. Whereas in the postwar period it was common for the female head of household to take this role as a responsibility contiguous to her husband’s 40-hour work week, today, 47% of American job posts are held by women.9

Today, the workplace is, after extensive feminist-activism, the domain of women as much as it is that of men. While there is legislation that legally prohibits discrimination based on gender, it has been based on the success of equality feminists rather than differential feminists.10 This has meant that, at least ideologically, men and women are to be treated as equals in the workplace in terms of both their access to jobs based on comparable qualifications and wages are to be equal for equal work. This rhetoric, though certainly crucial in equal treatment of women has come to mean that all employees are treated as males were in the postwar city, where it was generally assumed that his female partner was home, caring for the home-space and all domestic needs. This has created workplaces that are insensitive to the domestic responsibilities of individuals, both male and female, who are now equally present in the workforce, even though it cannot be assumed that anyone is home caring for the home space and the domestic needs of the household. What is created is an impossible condition for the majority of Americans, in which healthy foods are either unaffordable or there is no additional time that can be allocated to their preparation.

The movement into the suburbs could potentially make these foods relatively affordable when compared to living expenses in urban centers, but the time to prepare them still poses a problem. Whereas the single-wage earner household, as an actively chosen condition, is still an insufficient means to cover household expenses, it is the implication of suburban lifestyle. What’s more is that more millennial women expect and/or aspire to be full-time homemakers than female Baby Boomers actually did.11 If the single-wage earner family becomes a condition that is sustainable for a majority of Americans, it presents a possibility that the gendered urban-suburban dichotomy could be repeated.

While they have become much more common to see men who stay at home, to care for the household space and family full-time, the data still shows this to be a primarily female occupation. While educational attainment has largely leveled out between the genders, females are much more likely to put their careers on hold to start families than men are. This is partially due to the normative gender roles that continue to be prevalent in the American social imaginary. Another factor that could be explanatory of this trend is the gender wage gap that continues to be statistically significant, even with the equality legislation in place. The Institute for Women’s Policy Research published a study in 2013 demonstrating the stagnation in the closing of this gap since 2000. For the last 15 years, American women have been earning approximately 74% of what American men earn hourly. The study shows that the gender wage gap becomes more pronounced with higher-levels of educational attainment, making this an especially poignant problem for millennials, who in general, have higher levels of educational attainment than other generations. When the economic realm continually puts a lesser economic value on women’s time in workplace, in a hetero-normative household structure, there is a financial logic that makes it such that a woman’s staying a home to work creates the best financial situation for the household.

The current mode by which the gender-wage gap is regulated is through individual companies. While some have formal processes by which to mitigate these inequities, the general understanding is that it is an understanding of tenuous understanding of the problem and a value in equality, but little grasp on the structural conditions that create this specific outcome. There have been three attempts to institutionally enforce equal pay, such that it better addresses contemporary conditions of workplace sexism by extending the enforced practices of federal contractors on all American employers with the Paycheck Fairness Act. The bill, though it had the support of President Obama, was blocked by congressional Republicans in 2010, 2012 and 2014. As such, changes to the condition of the gender wage-gap are left to corporations who have little incentive to enforce a costly change that would often go unnoticed.

The move that Millennials are allegedly making to the suburbs does not represent an absolute ideal today, but rather a negotiation of the conflicting values that Americans hold about housing and lifestyle with their economic capacities. Today, the collectively held imaginary around the American Dream is the still pervasive narrative of The American Dream. While this narrative was constructed in the early 1950s, and a number of the values
outlined in it have changed, the thing that remains constant as a fundamental part of the American value system is the idea that homeownership, whether literal or symbolic is an a priori requirement to full participation in civic and social life. This has idea of the functional and symbolic values of housing has been an influential and recurring theme in American life, since the postwar era, regardless of the changing contexts and character of residential settlements. It is this notion of homeownership that when coupled with contemporary expectations of lifestyle, that the reality of the majority’s financial attainment makes their combination inaccessible to most households.

Since the 1980s, there has been a decline in the middle class. For the last two decades of the 20th century, this shrinking was because more people were making too much money to be considered middle class, but since the 2000s, the steady decline in numbers is for the opposite reason: people are not making as much as they used to. This lower economic attainment becomes problematic when the foods that one is meant to consume, not only due to societal pressure but also for general health and well-being, and been through their being demeaned in the 1950s as standard fare, and subsequently being pointed to as a social and environmental cure-all, have be constructed as luxury commodity and are priced as such - at least, relative to the incomes which the majority is earning. The commodification of different types of food products has generally been aligned with the foods that are considered superfluous to a healthy diet, or at least reflected an additional process that the raw good underwent. Today, the commodification of food products is precisely of those that are considered to be healthy, and perhaps more pervasively so, act as markers of social and economic status. While this phenomenon of the commodification of foods that Americans are at instructed to eat by health professionals and popular media alike, for the sake of their health, but also to benefit the environment, local agriculture and agricultural workers, cannot singularly be assigned as the impetus for millennials’ recently documented movement out of the city and back to suburbs, what is known, is that today, healthy, conscientious eating is either expensive, time consuming or both. While aspect of contemporary life is not necessarily problematic when considered individually, it becomes challenged with the changing professional-domestic dynamic and the domestic spaces for food preparation and consumption in the urban housing stock.

Like the foods that are currently en vogue, the housing that is said to be both healthy and the socially and environmentally responsible choice, by urban planners among other urban-professionals are those in densely-populated, urban spaces and are available only at a premium. Again, the choice that is meant to generate both personal benefit and a public good, is that which is a greater financial burden for the individual who takes it on, due to the unwavering, collective value placed on homeownership and the commodification of any external benefit that presented by the consumption of any good. Both the housing and the food that is considered ideal, today, as backed by popular science and logic, is that which is the most expensive. It is once understood as necessity and luxury.

The question of the appropriate consumption of these goods (or lack thereof) requires a massive, structural reframing, which has not occurred since the tabula rasa planning of the postwar suburbs, over half a century ago. While there have been incremental changes, these changes, like the acceptance of women into the workforce, the promotion of home-cooked meals or dense urban settings as ideal locations for residential settlement, are not reflected in the core values forwarded in the designs of and the policies that govern American spaces. There is a structural nostalgia for the postwar period as it has been canonized by the American Dream narrative. This nostalgia is not just for the superficial image of the nuclear family in front of their brand new Ranch house, but is instead a wistfulness for American exceptionalism and a booming national economy that created a condition that allowed for the ideals of the time to be realized in built form. The contemporary conceptions of domesticity continue to how we plan spaces and allocate resources, though contemporary conditions are decidedly different.

The narrative of the American Dream and its formulation parallel to the development of advanced capitalism in the United States, has been recently challenged with the 2008 housing bubble burst and the following economic recession, which pointedly brought to light the problematic nature of homeownership which was staked as an ideal condition during the postwar period. While the movement back to these spaces and this type of home-consumption by millennials, is a very recent phenomenon that is minimally documented and, though its causes can only be assumed, this study posits the values that moved people back to urban centers were not compatible with the lifestyle dictated by the ideals found in American Dream. While Americans began to demonstrate a willingness to change the form and character of housing they would consume, to that which is forwarded as socially and environmentally conscious, the American Dream is fundamentally at odds with the reality of present-day conditions in the United States and the contemporary ideals in housing and foods are not priced for the majority: American ideology is fundamentally at odds with economic, social and environmental realities. If urban planning, as a discipline, forwards urban living as a model, then there are a series of changes that need to occur at a structural level to make this a feasible possibility for the average citizen. The call is one for a reformulation of the American Dream that forwards both ideals and for policy makers, urban planners and designers to respond to that dream rather than one that was conceived of over half a century ago.