The Life And Times Of The Modern Kitchen: A Long Form Read

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Kitchens Come In All Shapes, Sizes, And Styles

Their shape, style, size, placement and any number of other factors vary by country, by regions within countries, and certainly by architectural style. We fuss over our kitchens. We think about ways to improve them, refurbish them, resurface them, re-invent them. That’s because kitchens are tied to one of our very basic drives; food. But, kitchens are also vitally linked to something else that’s pretty basic to us; community.

Since we emerged as a social species, humankind has been united by rituals surrounding food and eating together. So, it’s not just about simple nourishment as a physical need. It has to do with our values and priorities as individuals and as families. That’s why the kitchen is so important. So, let’s take a look at the kitchen, now the established nerve center of the household in many regions and cultures. First, let’s take a look at how kitchens evolved by looking at how some notable civilizations incorporated the kitchen into daily life.
The Ancient Egyptian Kitchen (6000 BC – 332 BC)

Ancient Egyptians are among the first established civilizations recorded in history that gathered in cities and organized life around them. They also organized food around agriculture and livestock rather than solely by hunting and gathering. Unlike the wandering tribes of pre-history, the ancient Egyptians were interested in laying down roots and staying. Remember the pyramids! This means that kitchens were permanent spaces, not just temporary cook fires made by a people constantly on the move.

So by virtue of that, the Egyptian kitchen featured some of the same things that the modern kitchen features, although Egyptian kitchens often were half indoors, half outdoors to take care of smoke and smells. They used clay ovens designed for baking since their agricultural innovations allowed them to process grains for bread. They were also home brewers of beer, a beverage which they considered to be a gift from the god Osiris himself (who can blame them?). They ground their own flour in a built-in mill, which was a must-have in every kitchen at the time, kind of like a microwave is today. The Egyptians understood passive design, too – they built their kitchens on the south part of their buildings so that the north wind would blow the smoke of cooking fires away from them.
The Hellenist Kitchen (336 BC – 146 BC)

The ancient Greeks of the Hellenist period believed in passive design as well. Because of their climate, kitchens were most commonly outdoor affairs, with houses designed in an atrium style.

This means that the rooms of the average home were arranged around a central courtyard, which is where many kitchens were located. In some of the more affluent homes, a kitchen was a separate room. The diet of the time was centered around breads and cereals (thanks for innovation, Egypt), meat and fish. They also innovated with the storage, preparation, preservation, and serving of foods that are easily kept for long periods of time like olives, sausages and cured meats, honey, vinegar, and a myriad of dried spices and dried fruits. This is not to mention wine, which they drank at nearly every meal.

In those indoor kitchens, there was often an attached room for storage; a larder, cellar, or pantry, but also for the storage of utensils. The fires of the kitchen in this case were used not only to cook meals, but also serve to heat the house at night when even in Greece the temperatures drop after the sun goes down. Actually, the outdoor kitchen model developed by all early civilization would be a model for the more recent “summer kitchens” in areas where keeping a house cool had to do with keeping cooking fires outside. Energy efficiency isn’t a new idea! And in ancient Hellenist Greece, it centered around and in the kitchen.

By the time the Ancient Greeks established their civilization, the importation of food was common practice. This was fed by how the Greeks took to seagoing, importing food from the Middle East and Africa.
The Imperial Roman Kitchen (27 BC – 610 AD)

Roman society was very class-oriented during the heady days of the Roman Empire. So, the kind of kitchen you had depended on your societal status, including whether or not you had your own kitchen at all.

For the lower classes, Roman citizens who were in cities had access to a single brazier in a one-room living space, or communal cooking spaces located in urban centers, but no kitchen to call their own. The higher ups would have kitchens in their private homes, but wouldn’t spend much time there. It would be their servants (actually, their slaves – let's not kid around ...) that would do the food preparation in these kinds of households. Air quality wasn’t a priority in the indoor Roman kitchen as a result, with very little ventilation. Like most ancient civilizations, healthy working conditions weren’t really a thing.

As much as the Roman Empire is known as a time of feasting and gluttony, cooking was looked upon as lowly work. So, their kitchens were purely practical, not really a place to put any kind of sense of pride as they are today. Actually, the kitchen had this reputation for many eras in Western civilizations, tucked in the back of a property where slaves, and later servant cooks worked away unseen. It was only when people began to cook for themselves that the role of the kitchen would shift. More on that in a second!
A ritual food container of the Western Zhou Dynasty, Ancient China. As you can see, their cooking vessels weren’t just functional. They were practically art. The kitchen and the activities that happened in them were valued highly.

### The Zhou Dynasty Chinese Kitchen (1046 BC – 256 BC)

To contrast that idea of the kitchen as a place of lowly work, in Zhou Dynastic China the kitchen and those who worked in them tended to be valued to a far greater degree. But, like the Romans, the ancient Chinese were also very status and class-oriented.

We’ve got celebrity chefs today who pride themselves on their skills and on their kitchens (and their ability to yell at people), as well as the accolades from the public. Ancient imperial China practically invented this idea (maybe not the yelling ...), even if the cooks of the time were still commoners for the most part. Yet these people were greatly valued by nobility. This is because the idea of food itself was connected to all aspects of life, from medicine, politics, to social relations, and even morality. They even had a kitchen god!

To that, their kitchens were looked upon as the heart of the home, linked to health and prosperity. The type of stove a household had was a reflection of their social status. Kitchens were often shared, but the stoves – never! Even if all kinds of cultures in the west pride themselves on their kitchens, the Dynastic Chinese poured all kinds of symbolism into them as a means of valuing (and judging!) the state of their family and its members. When we say that the kitchen is the nerve center of the home today, perhaps we’re echoing what was happening in China thousands of years ago. But even still, it would take a while before the kitchen as a separate space would become the norm.
The Edwardian Kitchen 1901-1910’s

So, let’s skip a couple of thousand years to more modern times, historically speaking.

The rise in importance when it comes kitchens as central social hubs to a home is a pretty new concept. Some of that is because, as mentioned, the idea of a kitchen as a fully integrated room within the average household is pretty historically recent, too. This has to do partly with division of labor when it came to meal times, with the way that house layouts evolved, and with our relationship to preparing food, too.

The kitchens in more affluent homes up into the early 20th century were the domain of servants, or were at least thought of as places where low-work was done. So, as a result, kitchens were tucked away in the homes of the wealthy, where they didn’t have to see (or smell!) what it took or who it took to make their meals. You’ve seen Downton Abbey, right? Even in homes that were not populated by servants, the kitchen was still tucked away, a place of practical activities with not much room for comfort and aesthetics – or fun! Of course, with the advent of electricity and a more common use of indoor plumbing, things had to have been a whole lot easier for the Edwardian kitchen worker than it had been previously.
The kitchens of the 1920s and 30s were still pretty stark and very functional, with bare fixtures and limited cabinetry. But, you can see that the bones of the modern kitchen as we know it today were beginning to take shape. (image: Library of Congress)

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**Roots Of The Modern Kitchen**

To that point, it's important to note that some of the things we see in the modern kitchen today began to be commonly in place even in this earlier period. Edwardians had figured out sanitary practices in places where food is prepared, and began to invest in those surfaces that enabled them to maintain them. For instance, the use of porcelain tile, stone tile flooring, and backsplashes began to be implemented more commonly.

Their aversion to cooking smells helped, too, which is something they inherited from the prudish Victorians. This may also explain why the kitchen was still tucked away, often at the very back of the house or in the basement, and completely enclosed. As a result of this, kitchen lighting was very important, too, as was the importance of having every conceivable pot, pan, utensil, and plenty of storage. No telling what sir or madam would want to have for dinner that night! Yet apart from the question of class in the household, the roots of the modern kitchen were established, with storage, easy maintenance, and clean spaces for cooking all becoming emerging priorities for everyone.
Rise Of The Modern Kitchen: 1920’s – 1930’s

By the 1920s and 1930s in America, the kitchen as the symbol of home and hearth was becoming more formally established, even if it still wouldn’t be thought of as a centerpiece in a home visually speaking. A big part of this had to do with the rise of certain kinds of technology, like the use of ice boxes and other kinds of rudimentary refrigeration to keep meat and dairy products.

Another was mass production, associated more with the automobile industry, but also having a pretty big impact on the manufacture of stoves and other appliances. But, a huge chunk of this change is down to another very important factor; a rise of the middle classes.

When middle-class families began to cook for themselves, the idea of being in the kitchen deliberately and doing the work oneself while still maintaining a sense of having “arrived” financially changed the way the room itself was perceived. It changed the status of the activity of cooking, too, not just as a means of feeding a family, but also as a place that served as a site for creative outlets for those doing the cooking. It would still take a while before the kitchen would be thought of as a place that should look nice, as well as to be functional. But this change in attitude certainly helped, proving that human perceptions and human activity always drive our environments as a species. But at the time, human activities in kitchens were slowly being looked at as meaningful, rather than just as low-work, although we haven’t talked about sexism within that shift. That would take too long a time to address when it came to the kitchen and the role of women in our cultures.

By the end of the 1930s and into the 1940s, the general shape of the modern kitchen was in place. This was largely due to the innovation of the “fitted kitchen” which arranged cabinetry and appliances for visual effect, as well as for practicality.

Even through the Great Depression, the role of the kitchen was becoming more and more central to human activity within a home in terms of appliances, placement, and the kinds of human activity that went on there. Unfortunately during this period, the rise of soup kitchens, breadlines, and shantytown kitchens brought things back to kitchens merely being functional spaces, rather than ones to be proud of. It would take a world war to shift things back again for everyone.
Baby Boom Period Kitchens – 1940s – 1960s

During the period of the Second World War, cheap vinyl and linoleum would be a common floor surface in the kitchen, along with those highly functional, but not very sleek-looking appliances, which would become fancier and more "modern" when the war was over. The “fitted kitchen” would emerge for the first time from the late ‘30s and into the ‘40s, meaning that the cabinetry and appliances would be installed as a unit in the way that we associate with the modern kitchen today; not as stand-alone elements, but integrated like pieces of furniture you’d find in other rooms. The template for the modern kitchen was beginning to come together.

By the end of the war, business in the United States and in Canada was booming. The war had ignited a new manufacturing sector. And instead of making planes and tanks, the economy shifted to the home front. This meant building new houses, new suburbs, new infrastructure to get those living in them around, and new appliances. Because those who returned from the war were empowered to buy homes with thanks to the GI bill, a new middle class was born, and so was the new, modern kitchen. That’s what happens when you empower the middle classes, friends; economies change for the better!

Suddenly, people had more money to play with after so many years of suffering through a depressed economy. That meant money for new-fangled refrigerators that kept food cool more so by Freon coils than by a block of ice in an icebox. Refrigerators also featured a separate freezer for the first time, allowing for dual storage and better results in preserving leftovers.

The development of laminate technology for countertops made for easily installed, and easily cleaned cooking surfaces. The same technology would be used for the creation of flooring a few decades later, of course.

Electric and gas ranges were more available to the average person by this period, too. And the development of the food processor by the mid-1940s opened up consumer markets for kitchens to an even greater degree, not to mention some crazy idea that they were beginning to work on having to do with cooking food using microwaves. Jeepers! What a nutty notion! Well, it was until the 1970s and into the 1980s when prices began to come down along with the size of the units.
“The Kitchen Triangle”

Mid-century kitchens came in various forms, with various technologies changing the way people operated in them. But, one principle began to emerge as an important thread to how kitchens were laid out, and that was the kitchen work triangle. This principle tells us that in order to be efficient in a kitchen, access to the fridge, the sink, and the stove had to be held in balance. The development of this idea started in the 1940s, but was popularized from then on. The University Of Illinois School Of Architecture developed this idea fully, and it later went on to inform standard construction practices of American mid-century suburbs.

Even if the technology, the sizes, and the styles had changed from the 1950s to the end of the 20th century, the basic organization of a kitchen's layout is still largely in place.

Whether you’re a 1950s housewife or a 2014 stay-at-home dad, you still need equal access to food prep, food storage, and food cooking without undue exertion. When something works, you stick with it!

And once again, we see that it’s human activity that dictates the space, and the importance of a space in everyday life. Once they got that squared away with the kitchen triangle model and it became built into the design of the average kitchen, comfort and style in kitchens started to become a priority, since the practicalities of operating in kitchens had been systemized. The sleek designs of the 1950s and into the 1960s, not to mention the harvest gold/avocado green/burnt orange trio of colors in the 1970s all revolved around this same principle, as it still does today.
The 21st Century Kitchen (So Far)

The kitchen triangle remains to be in effect, from the open concept kitchens to the limited-but-elegant galley kitchen, to fully functional outdoor kitchens that hearken back to the courtyard kitchens of Hellenistic Greece that we talked about above. And to that, the idea of outdoor cooking which was relegated to the barbecues of the past is now thought of as being equally important locations for family meals. Twenty-First century homeowners want to make the most of their spaces, from outdoor dining rooms, to morning rooms, to outdoor entertainment centers. This means having access to a kitchen while outdoors is becoming more and more sought-after.

Technology has come a long way, of course, with Energy Star appliances for energy efficiency, huge advancements in digital and “smart” cooktop surfaces with matching pots that are designed to work specifically with them. But, in the 21st century home it’s not the gadgetry that is the point, like the commodity-driven economies of the baby boom period. Our kitchens center around our values that go beyond the act of consuming or convenience. Times have changed, so our kitchens have too.

Today, we care about energy efficiency because in our era, dwindling resources and higher energy bills are a reality. So, we’re buying appliances that are more energy efficient, and that include smarter design like the simple adjustment of having a freezer on the bottom of our fridge space because the design itself makes it easier to keep food cool. We care about the best use of the space we’ve got because buying a home is harder. So, we’ve created those outdoor kitchens I mentioned earlier. We care about our health and range of ability because we are getting older as a population. So, we implement universal design in our kitchens; bigger handles, larger dials, lower counters and appliances, cork flooring to absorb impact from dropped items (and people!). Because our values as a society have shifted, that’s had a knock-on effect in the ways in which our kitchens have been organized.
Common Threads In Kitchens Through The Ages

So, what are some of the common threads we’ve seen in kitchens from the ancient world to the end of the 20th century, and into our 21st?

Well, one would be the idea that the kitchen is the center of cohesion for the rest of a household. It takes a lot of effort to gather, store, prepare, and cook a meal, with varying degrees of exertion today. But, historically speaking it was literally a vital concern to prepare food, and to ensure that everyone in the house is fed and kept warm by cooking fires. In the earliest kitchens, all of this happened using the most basic of tools. But, all around, I think there were still a few things about kitchens as they were then which are certainly still important today.

When we think about the comfort of those doing the work (Romans aside, having institutionalized slavery in their kitchens), the factors of temperature, ventilation, and light are pretty much the same in importance. So is the idea of using the heat from kitchens as a means of heating a property even ambiently, and placing a kitchen accordingly in the layout of a home to account for that. The same goes for natural light, and for airflow to vent out cooking smoke, and smells. Even the Romans could get behind that, although maybe not for the same reasons as we do today.

And that principle we’ve seen come up so many times rings true again today as it did in ancient times; human perceptions, priorities, values, and the activities that come out of all that drives the space in which that activity happens, along with the development of the technology which supports it. So, with that in mind, what can we expect of the kitchen of the future?
The Future Of Kitchens

I think these common threads certainly point the way to the kitchen of the future. Maybe for we Gen Xers who’ve grown up watching The Jetsons expected robot maids and instant food machines when we were kids. But, that perception of kitchen, of homes, and of life hearkens back to the era in which the science fiction of the time was still making the assumptions of a baby boom economy. Not so in 2014 and beyond. That will be reflected in how a modern kitchen will evolve. So, what can we expect in the kitchen of the future?

Personally, it seems to me that when we’re predicting what any room of the home is going to be like, then we should do what seems to be hinted at all through history; follow the values and realities of the culture. For instance, we are getting older as a population, and our population is rising, shifting to living more so in cities than in rural areas or suburbs. Perhaps this means that we will be living more densely in smaller quarters in the future, with multi-generational households. With this in mind, I think we’ll see more and more universal design principles in kitchens to serve those smaller space kitchens, but also serve a wider range of physical abilities, too.

This includes the way that appliances are designed, with bigger buttons and dials and being lower to the ground for wheelchair access. But maybe we’ll also see more voice activated technology, or at least appliances that can be controlled centrally from a personal device. The same goes for the way we manage the act of getting groceries.

There’s already talk of a fridge that allows you to take instant inventory, and to order what you’ve run out of online directly from an interface on the appliance itself. So, maybe that Jetsons thing can be factored in a bit! But, that’s not the whole story.
Learning From The Past

But, beyond all of that high-tech and gadgety model for the kitchen of the future, there's also the idea that maybe the past still has something to teach us. Maybe the idea of proper kitchen placement in a home as a means to heat it, just like they did when civilization began, is applicable in an era when energy efficiency is so important, and so talked about everywhere. This has implications on how housing is planned, and constructed, just as the kitchen triangle once dictated how a kitchen should be laid out in the suburbs of the late 1940s.

Maybe the idea of growing and preserving food on site in herb gardens, vegetable gardens, and even in urban livestock keeping (a growing trend) are going to become more the norm and less the curiosity in the rest of the 21st century. With more concentrated populations living urban centers by mid-century, less agricultural space outside of them due to changing climates, and less available land for farming. Our kitchens, as well as the rest of our homes, will adapt. That's what we humans have always been good at.
Binding Our Households Together

For a long time, almost since civilization began and perhaps when the first homo sapiens gathered around a fire together, the place where food is cooked and eaten has been central to the human experience. Even during times when the status of the kitchen was not acknowledged as being very high, and when activities conducted there weren’t either, the kitchen was still the beating heart of the home. This is still the case today. But, now that fact is more obvious to us. This isn’t down to advancing technology. It’s down to that same common theme since the beginning of human history; cooking and eating together are more than the sum of their parts.

We know now that they are the fuel for life itself.
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