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Farm Kitchens and Home Economy: Demonstrating Care

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We open with six staged kitchen photographs. **fig.1** These were clearly taken for demonstration purposes, but just what are they demonstrating? At first glance, the kitchens look neat but unspectacular, a world apart from the streamlined glories of the mid-century American technokitchen. But, if we look more closely at the details (the pull-out boards, that meat grinder!), we glimpse something else: an alternative version of modernity emerging from rural rather than urban or suburban lives, stressing thrift, self-build, home production, and adaptation. And, at the heart of this alternative modernity lies an engaged, active consumer and designs centered on the female body.

This page of photographs comes from a 1947 study of kitchen cabinets produced at Oregon State College (today Oregon State University) by professor of home economics Maud Wilson. **1** Wilson was a prolific researcher in the home economics field, and farm kitchen rationalization had long been one of her specialties. While rationalization now tends to be associated with prefabrication and mass production as in the Frankfurt Kitchen, in the context of American university-based home economists' engagement with farm families, it resulted in another approach: a strategy more akin to mass customization. While recommending standardized principles and minimum dimensions to reduce cost and material waste, farm women, with the help of family members or other home carpenters, were encouraged to adapt these plans and equipment to fit their own bodies, routines, and spaces.

This approach originated in close studies of rural communities. Wilson worked with fourteen farm-owning families in Oregon's Willamette Valley: these "cooperators" were visited four to nine times and lists were made of what they stored in kitchens and the activities that took place there. How many people typically sat down for meals? How many miles were traveled each year to make common dishes? How much canning was done annually? (A formidable 387 quarts.) **2** Although we should not assume that farm women were oppressed drudges—they themselves rejected such a view—Wilson's study confirms their labor was not easy. The centralized services available in cities were not typically available to even better-off farm women, who lived on farms of 20 to 300 acres and looked after extended households. They did their own butchering, canning, churning, cooking, baking, cleaning, childcare, and laundering. They hauled wood and water, cultivated gardens, and tended poultry for additional income. **3**

1 Maud Wilson, *Considerations in Planning Kitchen Cabinets*, Oregon State Agricultural Experiment Station no. 445 (Corvallis: Oregon State College, November 1947), 442, https://ir.library.oregonstate.edu/concern/administrative_report_or_publications/k0698788d (accessed July 6, 2022).

2 See Maud Wilson, *The Willamette Valley Farm Kitchen*, Oregon State Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin no. 356 (Corvallis: Oregon State College, August 1938), 11.

3 As of 1930, 85 percent of farmhouses still did not have running water or electricity; only 37 percent had refrigerators; 60 percent had wood stoves. As late as 1947, Wilson still did not assume readers had electricity, piped hot and cold water, or a refrigerator, though she predicted these would arrive "eventually." Wilson, *Considerations in Planning Kitchen Cabinets*, 19.

Thus, the urban middle-class model of a full-time homemaker/consumer was never realistic for productive farm women. [4]

Increasingly influenced by industrial engineering, university-based home economists sought to ease housework and rationalize domestic workspaces from the 1910s on. Their engagement with farm communities, however, inflected their advice in specific ways. First, they saw that isolated spaces such as the Frankfurt Kitchen would not do for multitasking farm women. Instead, they promoted "living kitchens" with compact work spaces inserted into existing large rooms that hosted social activities, such as dining and children's play. Second, even though they advocated the use of labor-saving devices, home economists were aware that cash-strapped farm families made improvements only as resources allowed. Rather than wait for ready-made solutions, they exhorted these families to take matters into their own hands. Simple and inexpensive hacks to enhance a kitchen's serviceability might include repurposing washstands to act as mix centers, setting ranges and sinks up on blocks, or reorganizing existing equipment for easier workflow. To reduce trips and "kitchen mileage," home economists also encouraged families to build movable furnishings of all kinds, from step-saving dinner trolleys to wheeled work tables. **figs. 2 and 3**

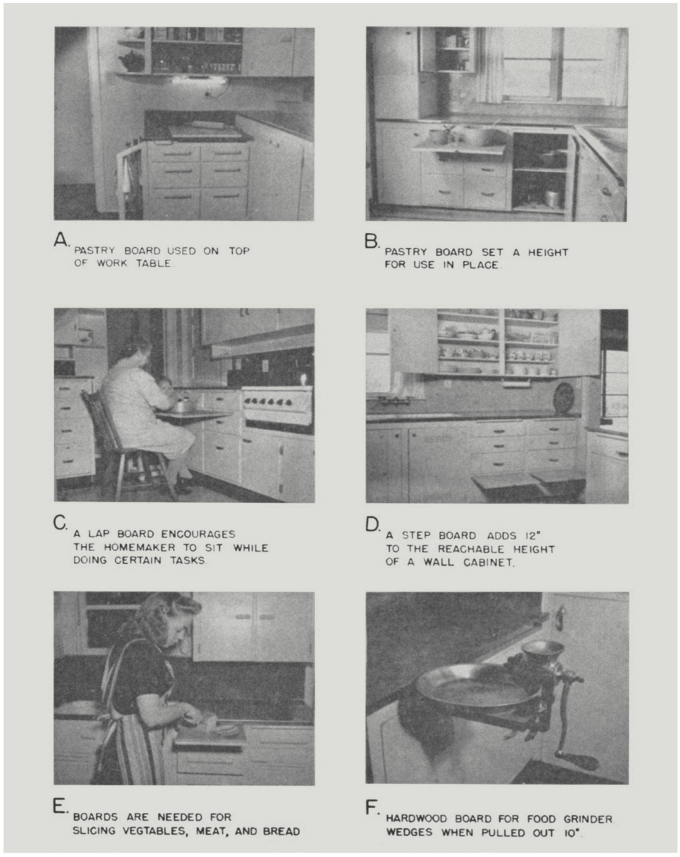

fig. 1 "Placement and use of pull-out boards." Source: Maud Wilson, *Considerations in Planning Kitchen Cabinets*, Oregon State Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin no. 445 (Corvallis: Oregon State College, November 1947), 42, https://ir.library.oregonstate.edu/concern/administrative_report_or_publications/k0698788d (accessed March 1 2022)

Wilson's farmhouse kitchen studies were a more systemic response to these same conditions. Building on her studies of farm women's routines, Wilson devised rules, equipment prototypes, and plan variations for the refurbishment of "cooperator" kitchens. These were publicized through her landmark bulletin *Willamette Valley Farm Kitchen* (1938) and refined in later bulletins, such as the 1947 example with which we began. Although Wilson rationalized plans and standardized cabinet dimensions with input from agricultural engineers, these were offered as possible, not final, solutions. Her primary goal was to share good design principles with remodeling farm owners to inform *their*

4 Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913–1963* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), xxi.

adaptations. The seated worker in the opening page of photographs, for instance, demonstrates the well-established "sit when you can" principle drawn from fatigue studies. fig.1 But how to account for the rather crazy proliferation of pull-out boards slotted into base cabinets? In addition to pastry and food chopping boards, we now have lap boards and standing boards that allow women to step up and reach the highest cabinets. The kitchen seems equal parts laboratory and climbing frame.

Although they appear excessive, multilevel pull-out boards had a distinct rationale in Wilson's work. For the previous two decades, home economists had taught women how to measure their work curves, consisting of elbow and shoulder reaches, in order to customize their kitchens. They rejected the streamlined kitchen's use of counters of uniform height (36 inches, the industry standard) and instead sought to ensure working surfaces and storage were placed at a "comfortable reach" for the operator (within the elbow circle) and not beyond maximum reach ("shoulder-to-grasping-finger-tip"). fig.4

fig. 2 A step-saving dinner wagon "can be made by any one who knows how to handle tools at all." Source: Leah D. Widtsoe, "Labor Saving Devices for the Farm Home," *Utah Agricultural College Experiment Station Circular*, no. 7 (June 1912), 61, https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/uaes_circulars/6/ (accessed March 1 2022)

Yet the pull-out boards were a tacit admission that the performance of domestic tasks regularly exceeded the ability of any one arrangement to meet them. Even the simplest task might consist of dozens of discrete actions—wash, scrub, pare, sift, roll, knead, beat, pat, spread, scrape, and so on—each requiring varying degrees of physicality, stances, and tools. Performance further differed according to factors such as worker ability, handedness, and sightedness. And even if farm wives were the kitchen's main operators, they were likely not to be the only ones. Influenced by John Dewey and Lillian Gilbreth, home economists were great believers in "teamwork" and in training children to do domestic tasks. Accepting that no fixed kitchen—even a customized one—could accommodate this broad range of uses and users, home economists relied on features such as pull-out boards and trolleys to give additional "flexibility of use." 5

5 Wilson, *Considerations in Planning Kitchen Cabinets*, 12.

Much more can be said about home economics kitchens and their research-derived design principles, which became astonishingly detailed in the postwar period. But the pull-out boards alone begin to tell the story of a different and less top-down mode of engaging modernity, one not governed by advanced technology, mass production, or consumption. Rather it was driven by a situated and scientifically informed understanding of

the exigencies of use, labor, and care, specifically those involved in female homemaking. As opposed to the glamorized and gadget-filled vision of housewifery circulated in the mass media of the period, home economists insisted on treating homemaking as *work* with physical and psychological costs and rewards for productive farm women. Their attention to female bodies and routines meant they highlighted how life cycles, aging, infirmity, even the wearing of bifocals, could impact home environments at a time when such concerns were not even blips on the radar of mainstream architectural modernism.

That this distinct—and, let us not forget, female-led—mode of practice has not been widely recognized is also easy to understand. These designs do not *look* modern, at least in comparison to the established canon. Yet, if we look closely, we can find residues of other modernisms even in the most canonic of projects. In an important study parallel to this one, Sophie Hochhäusl points to the hay box located to the right of the Frankfurt Kitchen's gas stove but rarely mentioned by historians or shown with its lid open. [6] The hay box was a type of fireless cooker that saved on fuel costs and labor, as it cooked food gently over many hours without needing the housewife's constant attendance. And, as home economists on both sides of the Atlantic liked to point out, users could easily fabricate hay boxes themselves. **fig. 5 a, b**

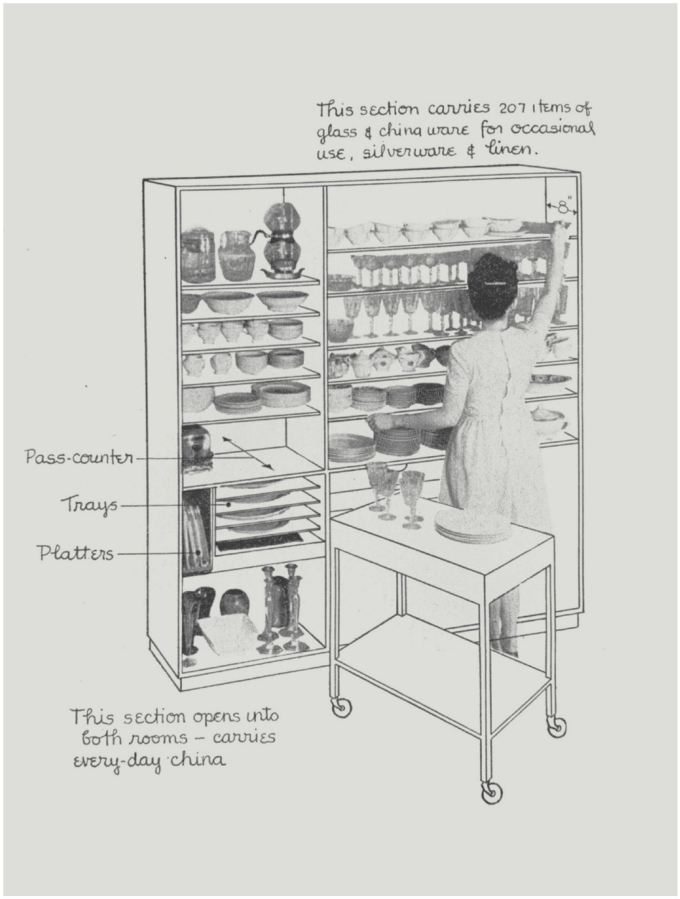

fig. 3 Double-sided storage wall, showing utility service cart. Source: Mary Koll Heiner and Helen E. McCullough, "Functional Kitchen Storage," *Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin*, no. 846 (June 1948), 64

6 Sophie Hochhäusl, "From Vienna to Frankfurt inside Core-House Type 7: A History of Scarcity through the Modern Kitchen," *Architectural Histories* 1, no. 1 (2013), Art. 24, http://doi.org/10.5334/ah.aq. Figure 8 of the article is a photograph of the Frankfurt Kitchen hay box, lid open.

The presence of the hay box disturbs the usual account of the Frankfurt Kitchen, which ties its modernity to its embrace of industrial construction, equipment, services, and theories. Instead, Hochhäusl's study traces another genealogy for the kitchen, re-enmeshing it in discourses of scarcity, self-help building movements, and alternative technologies. (And by allowing for supervision-less cooking, it makes evident that Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky did not assume women were or should be full-time homemakers/consumers either.) In a similar way, pull-out


Maximum
Reach

boards lead us to another strand of modernism in America, one that was resourceful, cooperative, and female-centered. In contrast to Schütte-Lihotzky, however, who ultimately turned to prefabrication as a solution, American university-based home economists resisted the pull of mass production well into the 1950s.

They standardized construction and design principles, but, in turning these over to farm owners for customization, they went beyond prescription, opening kitchens to differentiated bodies, flexible uses, and unanticipated adaptations.

fig. 4 Marjorie Knoll teaches a home economics student to measure her work curve, n.d., in New York State College of Home Economics records, #23-2-749, Box 77, Folder 25. Courtesy: Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, NY

fig. 5 a, b Image DD-HEM-19, from "Series of photographs showing how to make a fireless cooker at home. Taken in 1921 by Troy for Miss Blinn for Bulletin H-135, 'Fireless and Steam Pressure Cookers,'" 1921, in Cornell University, Human Ecology Historical Photographs, http://he-photos.library.cornell.edu/index.html/