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## **Abstract**

This article examines the importance of the kitchen for immigrant women who arrived in Australia in the late 1940s and 1950s. Using oral history interviews with twenty-seven immigrant women I examine the multiple and overlapping ways in which they ‘make’ home. Women construct home through the kitchen by re/negotiating the kitchen space to ensure that the kitchen and their central placement within it produces a ‘feeling’ of being “at home” (Hage 1997:102). Women shape the architecture and design of the kitchen in terms of their own understandings of the discourses of efficiency and domesticity, and also through colour and decoration, to ‘make’ the kitchen home. These understandings will be explored through nuanced readings of the immigrant women’s stories of their kitchen lives.

## **“It was another skin”: The kitchen as home for Australian post-war immigrant women**

In those days a woman's home, you were in the kitchen all the time. You felt safe and confident in your kitchen because it was yours, your job, your work or whatever you do, you feel confident, but if you meet someone else outside of that you lose a little bit of that confidence ... In the kitchen, I felt good ... Whatever I did everybody always seemed to like it. Cooking or whatever it may be, we just sat down at the table and it was a wonderful feeling. (Emily: Interview 1998, Scottish immigrant).<sup>1</sup>

### ***Introduction***

This article analyses how immigrant women in 1950s Western Australia ‘made’ home and, in particular, how the kitchen formed the central place of home. For immigrant women establishing a home was central to their ability to feeling at home in Australia. I use the ‘kitchen as home’ metaphor to convey how the women in my study felt about their kitchens. From their stories of kitchen life it became obvious to me as a researcher that because the women spent a great deal of time in the kitchen it was the central place of their lives in the 1950s: To them the kitchen represented ‘home’. The kitchen as home manifested in particular practices; it was a place where myriad social relations were enacted; it was place of work; and a place of comfort. This article will examine two overlapping ways in which the kitchen *became* home: through women's desire to have a place of their own; and through their re/negotiation of the kitchen space to produce a ‘feeling’ of being “at home” (Hage 1997:102). Specifically, women shaped the architecture and design of the kitchen in terms of their own understandings of the discourses of domesticity and efficiency and through their use of colour and decoration; in so doing, the kitchen became home, a place of safety, comfort and belonging.

Through storytelling I examine women's kitchen lives — their stories provide a view of life lived in the microcosm of the kitchen. Yet there are contradictions in the way that women discuss their identities. Many women perceive their identities as wife, mother, housewife and homemaker — and within these identities, others such as creative artists, cooks, chefs, stylists, tailors and project managers — but their aspirations and realities move beyond those socially prescribed.<sup>2</sup> Women's subjectivity, though emotionally and physically bound to their identities, is also embodied in a lived reality that often differs from the dominant notions of these identities. Such embodiment is constantly re/negotiated, and an examination of the lived realities of women shows this as a dynamic process. I argue, that the women of my study found ways of subverting and resisting dominant patriarchal discourses, such as domesticity and efficiency, which informed and defined their identities of wife, mother, housewife and homemaker (Sawick 1991; Smith 1999; Weedon 1987). The women show clearly that even though identities were prescribed in the 1950s kitchen, they performed and modified these identities often in ways that were quite subversive and which suited their own lives.

Importantly, knowledges and practices produced and constructed at a particular site, such as the kitchen, are regarded by Haraway (1988) as “situated knowledges”. Following Haraway (1988), I argue that situated knowledges produce ‘situated subjectivities’. Hence, women's expression of identity and exercise of power in the kitchen can subvert patriarchal understandings of work and architecture/design in the 1950s kitchen (cf Partington 1989).

The interview material used in this article is taken from my doctoral thesis entitled, *“It was another skin”*: *The kitchen in 1950s Western Australia*. In this article the stories are based on twenty-seven oral history interviews conducted between February 1998 and December 1998 with immigrant women who arrived in Western Australia in the late 1940s and 1950s. There were primarily three ways in which immigrant women came to live in Western Australia — as Displaced Persons, through sponsorship by employers or family, or through marriage. The immigrant women interviewed were from ethnic groups that, according to the Australian government, were easily assimilable into the Australian culture and ‘way of life’: Holland, West Germany, East Germany, Austria, Poland, Ukraine and the United Kingdom. There were also women who migrated from countries not actively sought after: Malta, Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan. The ages of the immigrant women on arrival varied considerably, from 14-35. The women’s class position can be identified as working class or lower middle class (according to income and level of education attained). In the 1950s the women lived in rural and urban locations and hence their stories reflect differing access to consumer goods and services, such as water and electricity.

***“Everyone was out to get their own place”<sup>3</sup>***

The ‘Australian dream’ of owning a home became ubiquitous in the 1950s (Lees & Senyard 1987). Then and now, it signifies stability and status (Johnson 1994; Thompson 1994). For immigrant women, having a home of their own nurtured a “sense of belonging” (Jadzia: Interview 1998, Polish immigrant) in an unknown country and “stability for the family” (Louisa: Interview 1998, Sri Lankan immigrant) after moving from refugee camp to refugee camp.<sup>4</sup> Hence, women’s ability to ‘make’

a home for themselves and their families is enacted both physically and emotionally: through the work of being a mother, wife, housewife and homemaker within a physical structure that they had often designed, helped to build and decorated.

The post-war housing and building materials shortage impacted significantly on the ability of immigrant women to physically 'make' home. In Australia, as in other Western countries post-World War Two, the shortage was a result of almost twenty years of economic stagnation due to the Depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s, and the Second World War (Archer 1996:185). In 1951 the economic recession in Australia further reinforced the housing shortage and led to a shortage of rental properties (Murphy 2000; Thomas 1993). The difficulties of migrants' arrival in Western Australia and their search for rental accommodation was intensified because many owners would not rent their properties to 'New Australians'.

'New Australian' migrant women arriving in the early 1950s who had children and/or could not speak English had more difficulty in finding suitable accommodation. Many women experienced explicit racism when searching for suitable rental accommodation: "most people didn't want 'New Australians' ... There were plenty of rooms advertised, but when you opened your mouth and couldn't speak properly; they shut the door in your face" (Gretel: Interview 1998, Austrian immigrant).

The desire to have a home of their own was intensified because many immigrants shared rental properties or lived with relatives when they first arrived, but often found the lack of privacy and cramped conditions unsuitable. After saving for a couple of years, Gretel, Clara and Anna all bought land in the same area and jointly built their

houses in 1952 and 1953 (Gretel, Austrian; Clara, West German; Anna, East German). Many women in my research could not afford to have a builder construct their homes. Hence, the ‘making’ of their homes was very slow. Clara, who lived initially in a caravan on their block of land while their house was being built, states:

Before J. was born, we moved up to the block and we lived there in a caravan ... when he was a baby. I remember breastfeeding him in the caravan, it was hot! *But we took it all*. When he was about three, no, maybe two and a half ... we moved into the house (Clara’s emphasis: Interview 1998, West German immigrant).

Some women bought established houses and renovated them. Renovation provided women with an opportunity to practise their design and decoration skills as they transformed these houses into ‘homes’. Further, renovation allowed women to ‘make’ their houses their own. Importantly, one of the first spaces to be renovated was the kitchen because it was the focus of the home:

My husband and I renovated that kitchen; it was a real old kitchen when we first went [there]. Everything was chocolate brown, and we ripped all the cupboards out and we bought the timber, things we had never done in our lives, we made new cupboards and we got the wood stove taken out and installed a gas cooker, [an] ‘Early Kooka’. We really went to town on our kitchen. As I said, that became the *focal point of our home* (Louisa: Interview 1998, my emphasis, Sri Lankan immigrant).

### ***Kitchen as Home***

The women in my research revealed the multiple and overlapping ways they ‘made’ home. The continual making and remaking of home created a ‘feeling’ of home centred in the kitchen, which was manifested through the care of their families and the design and decoration of their kitchens. Hage (1997:102) is instructive in outlining an argument for ‘making’ home. He asserts that home is affective, and one does not necessarily have to have a physical structure, but rather an affective feeling can create

the sense of being “at home”. Hage’s (1997) idea of feeling “at home” is exemplified in the stories of the kitchen that the women tell below. Furthermore, creating a home becomes integral to the women’s identities as being Australian.

The ‘kitchen as home’ was manifested in particular practices: a central gathering place for family and friends where women worked and talked with other women about family life, recipes and child-raising; a place to eat; a space where women sewed, knitted, read, helped children with homework, wrote letters and played games. It was also a space where many women felt they could relax, that they did not always have to be working: “I loved my kitchen. That was like my home. It was another skin” (Louisa: Interview 1998, Sri Lankan immigrant). Thus, many women describe the kitchen as the focus of the home and the space in which they ‘felt most at home’: “I think [it] is the heart of the house. And that’s where the heart is” (Lina: Interview 1998, Italian immigrant).

The kitchen became multi-functional: not only was it a gathering place and a social space for both friends and family, but it was also a work place for women. They fulfilled their ‘labour of love’ as wives, mothers, housewives and homemakers. However, such a ‘labour of love’ does not suggest that women did not sometimes complain about their house duties. Jadzia states: “I hate the stereotyping. You have to be ... in the kitchen pregnant and be barefooted ... Put it [this] way, I’m not [a] slave to it” (Interview 1998, Polish immigrant).

Below I will examine two ways in which women created a ‘feeling’ of home in the kitchen (Hage 1997; Pulvirenti 1997; 2000). Through their understandings of



efficiency and through their use of colour and decoration women re/negotiated dominant kitchen design and decoration discourses.

### **Work Triangle and Efficiency**

An ‘ideal’ kitchen type existed in popular discourse in the 1950s (cf *The Australian Home Beautiful*, June 1951; *Australian House and Garden*, October 1954; March 1955), informed by ideas of efficiency and scientific management — that is, a work triangle arrangement of appliances and work spaces, with streamlined built-in and continuous cupboards and work surfaces. The women in my study, however, lived in diverse types of kitchens. Thus, even though the ideal existed, the women modified, renovated and built kitchens that suited their own needs — they used and worked the space according to their own requirements and in so doing, resisted or subverted dominant efficiency and design discourses (cf Cameron 2000).

The basis of an efficient kitchen is a triangular arrangement of appliances and workspaces. Sparke (1995:85) contends that with scientific management, the kitchen became a one-worker space. Streamlining of surfaces to the worker’s height was inherent to Christine Frederick’s (1913) scientific management principles of the kitchen. Height specific cupboards and benches apparently allowed for greater efficiency in women’s work practices, specifically because if work areas were comfortable, according to height, the implication was that the worker (woman) would be more efficient. Frederick’s (1913) kitchen was — “preferably small and laboratory-like — in such a way that walking between working surfaces, the cooker, the sink, the food storage, the utensil storage and the serving table could be

minimised” (Sparke 1995:85). The work triangle informed the basic design of the kitchens of the women in my study. They were aware of such ideas about scientific management and efficiency, but women actually used the space of their kitchens in diverse ways.

Edna’s kitchen table was centrally positioned and was used as a workbench for food preparation, for cutting material, for “everything” (Edna: Interview 1998, Anglo-Indian immigrant). The positioning of Edna’s table defied scientific management of the kitchen outlined by Frederick (1913), who had “proposed the abolition of the central table” (Sparke 1987:16). The ‘ideal’ efficient kitchen did not have a central table, primarily because it would have meant taking more steps around it to get to the required destination, thus interfering with the work triangle.

A different picture of an efficient kitchen emerges from Clara’s story. Clara had freestanding cupboards — “everybody had a kitchenette. You had to have one” — rather than streamlined built-in cupboards (Interview 1998, West German immigrant). Edna and Clara efficiently used the space of their kitchens and created their own competing discourses of efficiency. Hence, women show resistance by using the space differently to how it was initially intended (Attfield 1989; Partington 1989).

In terms of kitchen efficiency, scientific management and the design process, many women had considerable impact. Significantly, Anna designed three of the kitchens in my study. She placed the kitchen in the centre of the home as opposed to the traditional rear of the house positioning advocated by efficiency experts. In the house she designed for Gretel, the cupboards and benches were adjusted to suit Gretel’s

height, that is, two inches lower than the normal three feet (Gretel: Interview 1998, Austrian immigrant).

The women in my study worked in their kitchens and manipulated the space according to their own needs. Logic is apparent in the ‘ideal’ kitchen informed by dominant architectural discourse which *generally* pervades kitchen design, but there is also the reality of working in the kitchen (Summerhayes: Interview 1998).<sup>5</sup> In effect, each woman produced her own discourse of efficiency — which often competed with the ideal — according to her own kitchen configuration and her own working practices. And her understanding of the kitchen as a social space as well as a workspace.

### **Colour and Decoration**

In the 1950s in Australia, as in Great Britain and America, a “new colour revolution” was occurring in kitchens (Sparke 1995:194). Women in my study use colour as a creative outlet and also to define the kitchen as a gendered space. Within the 1950s kitchen there was a feminisation of colour, particularly in relation to structural elements and accessories. Women reappropriated ‘feminine’ colours, such as pink, to identify the kitchen as a gendered space. Sparke’s (1995) contention that a feminisation of the kitchen occurred through colour reflects embedded cultural values of women’s position within society (Attfield 1989). But as I argue below, women disrupted and reinterpreted dominant discourses of kitchen design through their use of colour.

Although some women did participate in the functional design of their kitchens, all women in my study made decisions about decorating their kitchens. They chose the colour of accessories, dining suites, curtains/blinds, floorcovering and paint for walls, cupboards and benchtops, which reflected their personalities and emotional attachment to the kitchen (Coward 1984; Hayward 1975; Marcus 1995; Sparke 1995). Sparke (1995) argues that colour and decoration allowed for individual tastes to be articulated and, in doing so, women ‘personalised’ their kitchens. This type of personalisation resonates with creating a feeling of home for the women of my study.

The use of colour in the kitchen defined it as a gendered space. This was definitely the case for Jessie, an Anglo-Indian woman; the kitchen was her space and her domain. Such self-identification through colour ensured in many cases that the kitchen was identified as a ‘feminine’ space. The primary colour in Jessie’s kitchen was pink — she had a pink laminex table and chairs. She recalls: “We had this pink laminex table with the chairs to match. You know with ... chrome legs ... and then they had a pink back on them ... to match the table ... a very light pink (Jessie: Interview 1998).

Sparke (1995:196) argues that the most obviously feminine colour that appeared in the 1950s house was pink. She contends that pink reinforced gendered spaces for women and men:

Linked with the idea of female childhood, it represented the emphasis on distinctive gendering that underpinned 1950s society, ensuring that women were women and men were men ... Pinkness reinforced the idea that femininity was a fixed category in the lives of women from childhood onwards and by surrounding themselves with it women could constantly re-affirm their unambiguously gendered selves (Sparke 1995: 196-197).

The other colours (on walls, cupboards and benchtops) in Jessie's kitchen were neutral — white, cream or beige — except for her wood stove, which had a cream door and green surround. Hence, Jessie, and other women in my study, through their choice of colour, especially pink, unambiguously claimed the kitchen as their space. In this way, Jessie uses pink as an affirmation of her femininity whilst simultaneously reappropriating the most feminine of feminine colours to signify that the kitchen is her domain.

### ***Conclusion***

Immigrant women made home in Western Australia, in a physical sense through creating — building, renovating, renting — their homes but, importantly, they made 'home' by creating a kitchen space that reflected their ethnicity, maintained social and familial relations and, in many instances, embodied the identities of wife, mother, housewife and homemaker.

The process in the 1950s became one of continual 'making' of home and the creation of a 'feeling' of being at home. The desire for a sense of placement was central to the way immigrant women constructed their identities as 'Australian' so that they began to 'feel' at home. For immigrant women, owning their own home fulfilled the 'Australian dream' that many working-class and middle-class women aspired to in the 1950s.

Like the renovated and built homes that envelop them, kitchens are the repositories of feelings of intimacy and warmth, of security, comfort and belonging. Hence, the kitchen is a central site of creating a feeling of being at home.

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<sup>1</sup> Emily is a Scottish immigrant woman who arrived in Western Australia in 1951. Pseudonyms are used to maintain anonymity.

<sup>2</sup> It is not possible in this article to discuss these other aspirations, see Supski, S., (2003), "*It was another skin*": *The kitchen in 1950s Western Australia*, PhD thesis, Curtin University of Technology, Perth WA.

<sup>3</sup> Anna: Interview 1998. Anna is an East German immigrant woman.

<sup>4</sup> Many women (Jadzia, Gretel) lived in refugee/displaced persons' camps in Europe (mostly Germany) following the war, while their applications for immigration were being processed (Interviews 1998). Jadzia is a Polish immigrant and Gretel is an Austrian immigrant.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Summerhayes was an architect who began practising in the 1950s in Western Australia and continues to do consulting work.

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