Dream stuff: the postwar home and the Australian housewife, 1940-60
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Abstract

During the postwar period the modern family home assumed a special place in the Australian imaginary. Women achieved a greater public presence in this context, reflected in calls to Australian housewives to think about how their ideal home would look. The „new look“ required of the national home was addressed to its occupants, the Australian family, and was articulated through both government policy discourses and the popular media. Planning for and dreaming about modernity became key activities of homemaking. The requirements of women, in particular, to dream and plan for the future family produced the housewife as a modern figure responsible for the planning of a successful future for her family. The modern challenge to make home anew spoke to women's authority on day-to-day living, moving the efficient arrangement of the home and its public exposure firmly into their domain. However, this new, mass-mediated way of looking at domesticity created a contradiction in female domestic subjectivity. On the one hand, both state and market discourses suggested that women could sweep away the elements of traditional, particularly prewar, home designs that bound them to the home. On the other, popular magazines also placed a great deal of emphasis on the look of things and on looking itself, further inscribing women's identity within domestic space. We argue through a case study of the figure of the housewife in Australian home magazines that as a result of this contradiction during this period the identity of „housewife“ came to offer a new, reflexive relationship between female selfhood and home. Via the domestication of modernity in terms of gender, previous divisions between the public and private were destabilised. We suggest that the housewife's gaze both towards the home and towards her „domestic self“ intensified the problematic of feminity, putting it on the threshold of public and private space, offering a critical, enabling position for an ensuing feminist analysis.

"All she wanted to do was work until she and Alec saved up enough to get the deposit on their house ... that beautiful dream house on the little block of land out in Blacktown, that one with the pink and black bathroom, real tiles and the kitchen with the stainless steel sink, and the new baby in the frilled bassinet on the front porch."

Dorothy Hewett (1985 [1959], page 175)

In September 1950, the Australian Women's Weekly (AWW) ran a contest inviting „homemakers“ to submit designs for a new three-bedroom house because „the people who know all about houses and the running of them are the women homemakers“ (AWW 1950). The AWW offered a total of £4000 in prizes for the best designs, with a first prize of £2000 - enough to build a modest suburban house in the early 1950s (Victorian Fabian Society, 1958). During the postwar period the modern family home assumed a special place in the Australian imaginary, reflected in this injunction to Australian housewives to think about how their ideal home would look. The AWW's competition suggested that readers, just by designing differently, could sweep away the shortcomings of „traditional“, particularly prewar, domesticity. Badly designed from the point of view of the homemaker, the unmodernised prewar house represented „errors of judgement ... perpetuated in costly bricks and mortar in many big and small houses“. Because architects did not have to „apply the problems of practical living“ to their plans, their „design mistakes“ could cause a lifetime of inconvenience for housewives:

"Once built in they are there to stay.... Bad arrangements of rooms and long treks from kitchen to living quarters give hundreds of housewives fallen arches, and weight-lifting feats with clothes baskets up and down steps to the laundry shorten both tempers and lives“ (AWW 1950).

In this paper we examine how a new form of subjectivity was produced for and by women in the production of the new look and design of this home. We argue that such claims to radically reconfigure the given conditions of home as an ideal domestic space reflect changing forms of female subjectivity. (1) This analysis has been suggested by an ongoing encounter between psychoanalysis and feminism, which has produced theories of agency that account for the spatial aspects of subjectivity. Beatriz Colomina clearly outlines this premise in her paper on modernist

(1) This paper is part of a larger project exploring the trajectories of these changes in subjectivity through the figure of the housewife in a variety of cultural forms (see Johnson and Lloyd, 2004).
architect Adolf Loos: “Architecture is not simply a platform that accommodates the viewing subject. It is a viewing mechanism that produces the subject. It precedes and frames its occupant” (1992, page 83). Feminist analysis has often underplayed the importance of the interiority of the female subject, in an effort to move women into the public sphere. Mark Wigley figures this process as a blind spot of feminist theories of identity in his paper “The housing of gender”, published in the same volume: “The implied familial narrative of feminism growing up and leaving the secure private domain of the house for the public sphere exempts the house itself from analysis ... .The specific mechanisms with which it constructs space need to be interrogated before its effects can be resisted” (1993, page 331). Histories of subjectivity such as Colomina’s and Wigley’s suggest that domestic space needs to be recognised as an agent and ground of gender discourse, rather than simply as the outcome of individual choice and taste, which can be relegated to an invisible, private domain.

Joel Sanders has recently added to this analysis with his argument that the historically constructed boundaries between architecture and domestic design, or more specifically between modernist myths of male architectural authorship in the public domain versus feminised mass consumption, need to be understood as inscribing sexualised subject positions in modernist domestic space. His examples are the particularly modernist portrayals of the “gay decorator” and the “emasculated architect” apparent in what he calls the “Curtain Wars” of “professional rivalries that [have] cleave[d] the interior [design] community” (2002, page 1). This division between masculine architectural science and ‘feminine’ design practice, and the ascription of agency only to the former, is problematic, Sanders and others have suggested, and needs to be rethought in terms of interdependence, hybridity, and mutuality: “the surfaces of our buildings work like the clothing that covers our bodies; both are coded to enable us to articulate the various identities that we assume every day” (Sanders, 2002, page 9; see also Madigan and Munro, 1996). As we argue here, the imaginary of the post-war home initiated such a questioning of the distinctions between public and private identities precisely because the intensification of the public gaze onto home life gave the house-wife a chance to construct a new, modern identity as an author of domestic space (figure 1). If we, as Wigley phrases it, “rethink identity spatially [by] interrogating the multiplicity of decorative surfaces that produce the sense of sexuality... installed in the nineteenth century” it is possible to provide a more nuanced account of the emergence of the feminist subject of the 20th century (Wigley, 1993, page 388). By shifting her authority into the domain of architecture, we argue that a unique combination of consumerist and nation building impulses transformed the agency of the housewife in the postwar era.

Here, women were not just being constituted as subjects of a consumer-based modernity by the way in which they were being called on to play an active role in designing the modern home. Women’s magazines and home magazines placed a great deal of emphasis on planning the home as planning the future of the nation. Domesticity was to be at the core of what a postwar world would be about, and was integrated into the task of nationbuilding. A number of authors have pointed to the way in which domesticity became central to ideas of the modern citizen in Australia in the 1950s. Domesticity, as John Murphy argues, was now not a means of retreat from public affairs but an expression of one’s citizenship (2000, page 10). In Australia, the gendering (and racialising) of the suburban house in a settler society has been understood by feminist geographers Louise Johnson and Carolyn Allport to be crucial to notions of nationality and development in the post-war period (Allport, 1982; 1984; Johnson, 1993; Johnson et al, 2000). By the 1970s, sociologists Anne Game and Rosemary Pringle were able to argue that Australian suburbia was an entirely sexualised space of reproduction, and therefore perpetuated a dominant heterosexuality and middle-class identity, social patterns which were spatially inscribed in the period of our study (Game and Pringle, 1979).

However, the decade or so after the Second World War was by no means a homogeneous period in which these terms were universally accepted. While a certain vision of a classless home was offered in advertising and governmental discourse, the category of gender - as deployed in the monolithic and ubiquitous address to all women as ‘housewives’ - masked tensions of identification as much as it relativised personal experience. Conservatism and anxieties about change vied with discourses of hope and optimism in an environment of mass migration and unprecedented class mobility. In these magazines, the offer of hope for a better life and dreams of a common future dominated; women were hailed as central players in a national imaginary because they would be actors who would make such dreams reality. In the next section of this paper we therefore look at exactly how women as housewives were being made such key figures of a new domesticated modernity within these discursive spaces.
Figure 1. Cover of *Australian Home Beautiful* April 1946, ‘Woman looking at model house’ (see Seymour, 1946a)
The housewife speaks

Several important shifts in the ways that Australians lived after the war laid the foundations for a postwar housing crisis followed by a long boom. A greater proportion of Australians started buying their own homes after the war; this was accompanied by slum-clearance schemes which relocated inner-city populations to suburbs, and from rural areas to urban areas; and there was a long-term decline in employment in the personal and domestic service sector (Cuffley, 1993; Greig, 1995).

The homes that most Australians lived in - or aspired to live in - were reconfigured to match these changes in the modes of everyday life which were imagined in international, and particularly US rather than imperial and British, terms. As Jennifer Craik has observed in her study of the ‘Queenslander’ house, during this period interior design replaced household management as the focus of domestic ideology. Practices of interior decoration, she contends, “combine coda of personality with goals or ambitions, as well as aesthetic conventions in the projection of a public image of homemaking” (1990). The home magazines we focus on in our study, taken from the period 1940 - 60, reflect an erasure of the distinctions between decoration and planning, design and management, aesthetics and control. That is, the 1950s home increasingly articulated interior design as a form of household management. Whether budgeting for a new house or renovations, deciding on the kind of home the family would live in, or how it would be furnished, this discourse gave women a new capacity to shape (their part of) the world during the 1940s and 1950s.

This was mirrored in narratives outside mass-circulation magazines that were imbricated with the new visual culture of the post-war era. As Peter Biskind notes, in 1950s films, such as Giant and Pillow Talk, female characters shape the space of the home and, in doing so, shape and control “man's environment”: “Interior decoration becomes a metaphor for women's power to make over man's world, his values, in her image” (1983, page 290). The modernist redecoration of domestic space was not just a cinematic trope or advertising ploy, but was envisioned in the print culture of the same decade as creating a specifically gendered version of modernity (Colomina, 1994). Women, as agents of the modernisation of the home, and by extension everyday life, explored a different modernity from the kind of masculine vision that focused on transforming the sublime and grandiose spaces of industrial culture. By remaking the home and the suburb as a small-scale utopia, a more humble version of modernity proliferated in popular cultural forms addressed to the Australian woman in parallel with the national vision of economic development addressed to the working man. This new emphasis on thinking about and planning for home was manifest in two related ways: first, a proliferation of the image of the dream home in popular media; and, second, the heightened visibility of the housewife as the author of this dream. From the vantage point of the post-war home, our analysis builds on the work of feminist cultural historians and geographers who have identified historical relationships between spatiality and subjectivity that emphasise the ways in which women were implicated in post-war regimes of surveillance and control.

The interplay between visuality, subjectivity, and domesticity has been considered by several feminist cultural historians, including Leonore Davidoff and Catharine Hall (1992), Kathleen McHugh (1999), and Lora Romero (1997). This is clearly noticeable in popular understandings of the 1950s home as a problematic site of female subjectivity, associated with the denial of female agency at the same time as the glorification of the housewife. More subtly, cultural historian Jean Duruz has argued that Australian women’s memories of the 1950s have functioned as a source of private “struggle with images and meanings of ‘home’, the daily impossibility of living the ‘dream’, and … the site of [women’s] labour and social relations” (1994, page 174). We draw on this work here in order to understand better how changes in spatial arrangements of the home can be seen as discursive and relational. That is, changes to the uses and functions of the home are produced through and reflect changing speaking positions which constantly are underscored and pulled apart by wider social tensions. The housewife figure has always been an important link between public and domestic spaces, because as Jeffrey Minzelot, John Gawler, a practising architect after the First World War and deputy chair of the Commonwealth Housing Commission in the 1940s, traces these changes to the 1920s: “Other housing ideas came along. We bought American magazines and many of them had house plans and photos published every month, particularly the Ladies’ Home Journal; thus was introduced the Californian bungalow, or ‘bungle-oh’, as some called it. It had some good points; it freed the small house from the drawing room, introducing the idea of a living room connected to the kitchen by a door, introduced the breakfast angle, and built-in furniture. The domestic servant had quite disappeared for most people and the house plan was adjusted. The kitchen had good cupboards, the pantry disappeared and so did the scullery; instead there was a small wash house or laundry often as a separate outbuilding. The kitchen became a room the housewife could ask her friends to enter” (1963, page 53).
1979): “The privatised character of domestic existence does not mean it is closed off from public scrutiny, but that its privacy is the particular terms of description of its organisation, of the supervised liberty of family life” (1985, page 208).

Both middle-class and working-class women were increasingly expected to understand themselves as housewives in these terms. For working-class women, the two main forms of home-based economy disappeared in the 1950s with the shrinking of the domestic sector as a traditional area of women’s employment and with the diminishing contribution of boarders and lodgers as a source of domestic income. These former activities of outsourced domesticity were transposed into a new form of household economy: the task of producing oneself and one’s own family as modern individuals. The modern housewife who remade her home in the image of middle-class domesticity was not only making her household labour more efficient, comfortable, and pleasurable, but producing modern citizens (Cowan, 1983, page 100).

The housewife as a newly visible and vocal subject in the public sphere appeared at the intersection of governmental and market discourses. In an unprecedented collaboration between popular media and policymakers, and as an effort to “discover what sort of homes Australian women want after the war” (Department of Post-war Reconstruction, c.1947, page 2), the Department of Post-war Reconstruction, in conjunction with Woman magazine, sponsored a series of articles about “Planning the post-war home” during the early 1940s. The study - which was also published as a booklet titled The Housewife Speaks (Department of Post-war Reconstruction, c.1947), aimed at ministry-sponsored “community discussion groups” - asked women readers to indicate what they considered to be the ideal house size, layout, and design for their family, as well as surveying the need for community centres, nurseries, supervised playgrounds, shopping, and transport facilities. The ministry’s survey of Australian women – via readership of Woman - showed that “there is widespread interest in home planning”: “in many instances readers not only answered the question by indicating ‘yes’ or ‘no’, but wrote letters when they felt the questions needed more comprehensive handling” (c.1947, page 2). The mythic space of the nation was articulated to the home throughout this period in such projects, giving everyday life a common purpose and futurity.

Mrs Mary M Ryan, the only woman member of the Commonwealth Housing Commission established in 1943 as part of the Post-war Reconstruction project, gave an address titled “Homes of the Future” to the National Council of Women in Adelaide on 30 September, which anticipated this call for women’s everyday experiences to be revolutionised: “We must design housing for the future, not for the past or merely for the present. Any attempt to preserve the past must fail” (Ryan, 1944, page 1). During her tenure on the commission, Ryan drew on her experiences as a country housewife in a house without running water or electricity to assess the proposals brought before the commission (Allport, 1984, page 166). Ryan was less than enthusiastic about many proposals brought before the commission because they were not sufficiently modern in the terms prevalent during wartime, and “hark[ed] back to the old way of life”:

“The people for whom we should be building houses are young people who are now working hard in the Defence Services and the factories.

The mothers of the future will be the young women who are now in uniform or overalls. The background of their life will be quite different from that of their parents. They will be used to living together or working in groups, and to sharing many aspects of their lives. It is certain they will not lead the same lives as their parents” (Ryan, 1944, page 1).

\[\text{[3]}\] Ryan - a member of the Country Women's Association and former hospital matron in the town of Portland near Lithgow, New South Wales - used her experience as a prewar housewife to argue for her position on the commission when she was challenged by members of more radical women’s organisations: “Although I am only a humble housewife, my position on the commission is of equal status with the men, and each of us was particularly mindful of the women’s point of view and were watching the interests of the housewife and the woman in the home” (quoted in Allport, 1984, page 166). Allport notes that Ryan “became more and more impatient with the drudgery of her own housework as the work of the Commission focussed on ways of reducing household chores for the woman in the home.” She wrote in her personal diary during this period “I don’t take very kindly to the housework when I get home, especially the scrubbing, sweeping, polishing, washing, etc. that has to be done day after day in these wretched little cottages with no conveniences of any kind to make the daily grind a little easier” (1984, page 134).
Ryan's embrace of modern architecture was, then, an embrace of a modern social order. The programme of the Housing Commission was to instigate a modernised everyday life for the postwar generation via a new kind of domesticity: “Housing in its fullest sense will help people to live the type of lives adapted to their economic conditions. At present it retards them. Badly designed houses prevent people from taking advantage of the scientific developments of the age” (Ryan, 1944, page 3).

While the state investigated the future shape of the Australian home and family, planning and dreaming were now the key activities of homemaking according to the home magazines of the postwar period. A woman writing in Australian House and Garden magazine described the very real shortcomings of the prewar home when she declared “I'd like to blow up my kitchen”:

“The saner alternative, of stripping the whole place and replanning with modern equipment, won't help in this case. For my kitchen, like seventy-five percent of those in homes to-day, isn't just badly arranged. It's badly built. Too small and crowded for family use, placed like an afterthought in the coldest and darkest corner of the house, and with essential things, like sink and stove, and doors all in the wrong places . . .

It’s a sad little kitchen - sadder because it’s so common - but at least it has one merit. It has taught me to know exactly the kind of kitchen I'll build when I put a match to that bomb, and to find out what kind of kitchens appeal to other women of the same mind. And that's surely something!” (Dent, 1950, page 44).

Magazines showed young couples how they could realise this new way of imagining the Australian home. It was now not enough to find an affordable home and furnish it with what was to hand. A kind of second-order consumption – constructed through the consumption of images, ideas, designs, diagrams, and so on as much as actual goods - became the foundation of homemaking.

At times the imagination of the ideal dream home replaced more material forms of homemaking activity with the delays and shortages of materials so prevalent during and immediately after the war. Early and informed preparation was advocated. The house-wife became the coordinator of a team of home-building experts from the architect, to the builder, to the painter: she was to ensure that all parts of the home resolved into a harmonious whole. As an advertisement for Masonite (a low-priced, mass-produced fibreboard sheeting used for many new suburban developments, sold as a sheet that could be either cut into any size, or put together to form walls and built-in cupboards) recommended, while saving and purchasing were delayed, one should “Start now to design your future home”:

“Observation ... thought ... a pencil, paper and ruler are all you need to start planning a really ‘livable’ home. True, you can’t build it just yet, but an ideal home doesn’t just ‘happen’. It results from months of planning and thinking – planning and thinking that should start NOW.

Start a ‘Home’ notebook. Write down all those features in your present home that irk you; that make work and unnecessary steps - and your ideas to correct them. As you visit the homes of your friends from time to time observe points that appeal to you. Record those, too...” (Masonite, 1945).

This dreaming about home, based on the limitations and shortfalls of existing realities, was shown to precede the involvement of the architect. Experts were to assist them but the couple were placed at the centre of the home design:

“When you have finished your planning, both of layout and materials, go to an architect. His training and experience will save you many times his moderate fee. He will quickly show you what is practicable and what is impracticable in your plans. He will be able to knit your ideas into an economical compact whole” (Masonite, 1945).

A constantly shifting border in this imaginary between common sense and fantasy was articulated in terms of feminine and masculine knowledges. Women were not to dream too fancifully without testing their ideas out with their husbands. During late 1945 and early 1946, the Australian Home Beautiful (AHB) magazine featured a series of articles about Joanna, a young woman awaiting the
In 1946 the Australian government relaxed wartime restrictions on printing, allowing a print run of 40 000 per month. According to an in-house history of the magazine, “Post-war editors Roy Simmonds (1946 - 1951) and Keith Newman (1952 - 59) saw the circulation spiral upwards to beyond 100 000 in the building and do-it-yourself boom of the late 1950s” (Oliver, 1999).

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"Considering the Plan", affirmed women's desire for better-designed homes as rational and credible, and gave an example in which aesthetics and efficiency were harmoniously brought together. Mr X thought that a reader, Mrs S F, wrote 'feelingly' of her design for the home from the perspective of the housewife:

“I am sending to you my plan of a home I wish to build. I have lived for 14 years in a long, single-fronted villa, with kitchen right at rear, nearly 60 ft from back to front door, so I must have walked untold miles answering door bells and nursing the family when ill. So I am determined my new home shall be central in every way, and step-saving. Also, my husband [sic] and I are keen gardeners, and our back garden is always a mass of blooms and tidy lawns, but no one ever sees them unless they peek out the bathroom window. So I have planned my house round the garden, so to speak. I think the lounge view and dining room windows ought to reflect the Glory of the Garden” (X, 1945).

The model home which emerged from women's involvement in this modern imaginary was temporally and spatially integrated. No time would be wasted as a result of rational understanding of the movement of the housewife through domestic space, but a more important dimension was also emerging: the question of the new form of the gaze engendered by this fluidity. In the next section, we investigate this modernisation of the gendered gaze in detail.

The importance of looking

Through articles about dreaming and planning for one's home of the future, as well as drawings, images, and advertisements for homes, magazines such as the AHB helped their audiences to visualise the modern home well before readers were able to experience it themselves, and to understand how to place new commodities within it. Two advertisements for Masonite, published in 1948 and 1950, respectively, demonstrate this importance of the practice of looking at and within the home as the site of modernity. The first showed a woman in a 'new look' dress, characterised by its small waist and wide skirts, behind a miniature model of a modern family house (figure 2). The text above the model declared:

"There's a 'New Look' for homes too... but it is not just a vogue or a passing whim. As far as houses are concerned the 'New Look' will stay put .... The main problem in home-building today is to get maximum comfort, style and convenience in minimum floor space at the lowest possible cost. A 'New Look' home is one in which this problem is completely solved .... one which always looks as though it cost far more than it did ... and 'feels' larger than it is" (Masonite, 1948).

This new pleasure in looking - both in terms of looking at the modern house, and in terms of the new kinds of 'looks' (onto the garden, at other parts of the house, at spaces now made into features such as the kitchen and living areas) that the new house designs of the 1940s generated - exceeded the distanced and alienating Lacanian 'gaze' that has haunted feminist theory of the 1980s and 1990s. As Karal Ann Marling has noted in her study of the 'new look', it was not a strictly panoptic vision:

"The very construction of the [new consumer] artifact makes it clear that looking and viewing were central acts of consciousness. In the most fundamental ways, the New Look is about looking, too - about distinctive forms, eye-catching patterns and textures, and attractive colors; about looking at people and their clothes and being looked at in turn; about thinking about looking. Looking: not the judgemental 'gaze' of contemporary feminist theory, but something more like a scrupulous, pleasurable regard for both shape and surface' (1994, pages 14 - 15).

The obsession with the outside of things articulated a palpable optimism. But the need to be able to see, to look out on, suggested a need too for control, for security, and for the management of one's everyday world. But the subject of this looking was the housewife - it was she who was in control, doing the looking, and insisting that the look was right, that it was modern.

The second Masonite advertisement, which showed a drawing of a couple embracing as they look out of windows of a modern lounge room towards a newly planted suburban garden, suggested that the choice of Masonite as a building material would "speed up construction time and hasten that thrilling day when you are on the inside looking out" (Masonite, 1950) (figure 3). The dream of the perfect home was here a dream of being inside modernity, rather than excluded and separated from its benefits. This modernity was portrayed as particularly photogenic and international in AHB.
Figure 2. "There's a new look ..." (Masonite, 1948)
Figure 3. ‘When you’re on the inside looking out ...’ (Masonite, 1950)
Accompanying an article in the ‘Joanna plans a home’ series in April 1946 were pictures of a 1940s house built for a Californian family. The photographs showed a large living room with floor-to-ceiling windows, with a view onto a garden. The article recounted the heroine's outing to “a cocktail party given by a newly introduced American friend of hers who had settled in Melbourne early in 1940 and built a very modern house. Joanna was not keen, as a rule, on going to parties where she hardly knew anyone, but she had heard a lot about this house from Marilyn, who was continually raving about it, that she felt she might as well go along and see what it was really like. Although privately she did not expect it to be out of the ordinary or that it could tell her anything she did know already. For by this time Joanna was beginning to feel that she was something of an authority herself on houses and furnishing” (Seymour, 1946b, page 9).

The caption to this photograph explained that the house had been designed by a ‘Hollywood architect’:

“Picture-goers may possibly have seen the name - they have almost certainly seen the work - of Richard J. Neutra, an American architect who has created some sensational effects for the screen and for those who act on the screen. He was one of the first exponents of the idea of bringing garden and house together” (page 9).

With her newfound enthusiasm for modernism, Joanna, too, “loved the idea of linking the house and garden with great sliding windows - though naturally her own scheme would be on a much more modest scale” (page 9). Despite her previous desire to decorate her house with ‘period pieces’ and her prejudices against modernism, “She admired the handsome settee which divides the living room from the dining area, and was tickled by the quaint design of the chairs” (page 9). The Australian magazine indicated that Joanna had not discovered this modern scene all on her own, but had been “shown the picture in a [US] magazine called Interiors” (page 9). Cultural material from the image industries of North America, and, in particular, California, despite being organised and distributed globally during this period, were consumed in a national and local context via Joanna’s fictional identity as an Australian housewife.

The scene of the ‘cocktail party’ described in the magazine, and her fascination with it, reveals the new functions of the middle-class home, as it now provided in its open-plan design a way of being public in private space. This house enshrined a new level of comfort in its ability to entertain large groups of people without crowding or anonymity.

“Joanna had never before seen such a modern interior designed and carried out so completely to the last detail. Several things struck her. The room had a cosy air, there were no dark or remote-seeming corners, yet there was still plenty of room to move about.

She noticed how the various party groups formed and re-formed easily, wandered out onto the terrace and back again, found somewhere to sit and put down a glass - often a problem at cocktail parties - without interruption or effort” (Seymour, 1946b, page 10).

This discourse of the dream home resolved lived contradictions in the national imaginary, particularly for women, and expressed a new desire for harmony between women’s and men’s spheres in the discourse of family togetherness. This togetherness was important not just in gender terms, but also in categories of class. The reorganisation of the flows between previously carefully policed boundaries - between clean and dirty areas and visible and invisible activities - reverses earlier forms of domestic organisation identified with the emergence of the middle class in the early 19th century.

Davidoff and Hall in their study of the English middle-class home in Family Fortunes (1992) identified new uses of domestic time, and new regulations of middle-class domestic space in the early 19th century. They distinguish two stages in the modern segregation of living and housing: first, when productive work was banished from the domestic; and, second, when cooking, eating, washing, sleeping, and other ‘backstage’ activities were separated from polite social intercourse and assigned special places for each function (page 357). The postwar home we are discussing, freed of ‘traditional’ fussiness and architectural compartmentalisation, reflected the new sense of boundlessness and possibility of the spectacular postwar society that is evident in this example in
two important ways. First, the dream home, by combining activities imagined as separate in one overall space, reshaped categorical oppositions of nature/culture and public/private that were profoundly middle class by integrating activities that were previously separated and abjected from the public sphere. Second, because contradictions were still present in the ‘family togetherness’ ideal, and these tensions were manifest in the figure of the house-wife as an indeterminately private and public figure, the scene of the ‘cocktail party’ demonstrates the problems of being both manager and managed within such space. The housewife stood at the door of this new home, both worker and mistress. As she was described in AHB, she is “gracious mistress, but housemaid too” (Brown, 1995, page 13). By bringing the whole family together, and installing the housewife’s work at the social and physical centre of the house, this realisation of the dream home worked very hard to eliminate tensions that women felt in simultaneously fulfilling incompatible roles. These tensions were most keenly felt at the inner temple of 1950s domesticity: the modern kitchen.

On the kitchen front

Houses described as ‘servantless’ were invested with ideals of family togetherness both in internal layout and provision of outside play areas where children could be watched by mothers through kitchen windows. A pamphlet advertising George Hudson ‘Ready Cut’ housing, which offered several designs “based on the very latest architectural and interior decoration trends” of 1950 featured the ‘Bellevue’.

“Our new three-bedroom home will instantly appeal to the woman who prefers a larger kitchen than most (12612).Viewed from all aspects this is a most substantial looking home; and is an excellent example of the modern trend for large multiple windows. It is every inch a home in the family sense” (George Hudson Ltd, c.1950, emphasis added).

Endless dreams of domestic perfection were directed towards the kitchen. Indeed, AHB reported that US architects thought it the “most important room in the house” and regarded “its fittings and planning as a scientific problem of how to prevent household drudgery”. In the ideal (US) kitchen: “Cupboards, stoves and sinks are just the right height; you don't have to spend half your life crouching on hands and knees. Long cupboards give yards and yards of bench space, and these, like the floors, are covered with brightly coloured plastic, which is virtually indestructible. It also makes cleaning easy, for if you wished you could hose the place down … .

The latest gas and electric stoves are streamlined in all colours from white to lipstick red. They have time clocks and push-button controls like a radio, so that you can go shopping or to a card party and depend on it that your gas or electric stove will start the roast on its way at three or four o’clock. About one stove in four in New York is automatic” (AHB, 1951).

Functionalism may have envisaged the kitchen as a laboratory for food preparation, but home magazines illustrated for their readers how the modern kitchen could also be invested with pleasure. An article titled “Getting your kitchen out of hobble skirts” in Australian House and Garden magazine (1948) showed how the principles of efficiency and pleasing interior design were related. By showing “What scientific planning did to Jenny’s kitchen” (page 27), the magazine demonstrated the ‘glamour’ possible in ordinary housework in the right setting (figures 4 and 5).

The kitchen renovations depicted by the magazine foreshadowed changes to house design: “For the past generation the trend has been towards smaller and smaller kitchens, but the reaction has now begun. More and more people want bigger kitchens, and will sacrifice dining rooms to get them” (1948, page 25). This expansion of the kitchen zone reflected changes to middle-class living that meant:

“Kitchens have become the real living space in many homes. The glamorous gleaming cupboards and equipment are made a sparkling background in many homes to a convenient and dainty little alcove which starts off as a breakfast nook, but invariably finishes up as the family eating place for all informal meals.

Color, too, has made the kitchen of today one of the most liveable rooms in the house. Daring and colorful kitchen set-ups are commonplace. The color does a lot for the housewife’s morale too!” (1948, page 25).

While Australian House and Garden suggested “There is real fun in planning a modern kitchen. Try it” (1948, page 25), a “Service correspondent” writing to AHB in 1945 wanted to use “some spare time… plotting improvements to his home in the South and would like to know how he may
Figure 4. Photographs of Jenny's kitchen before and after (Australian House and Garden 1948, pages 24 - 25). Left: “Here are pictures of Jenny’s kitchen AFTER she’d remodelled it”; right: “The chart shows exactly how Jenny saved 34 minutes in getting an ordinary dinner in her remodelled kitchen.”

Figure 5. Photographs of Jenny’s kitchen before and after (Australian House and Garden 1948, pages 26 - 27). Left: “The kitchen shed its hobble skirts: doubled its efficiency”; right: “What scientific planning did to Jenny’s Kitchen.”
some day make his wife's kitchen something like the advertising sketches he sees in magazines without spending the small fortune some of them would certainly cost" (Smith, 1945, page 26). The carpentry expert in the magazine advised that some small adjustments to the plan should be made, and

"the height of the fittings ... should be suited to the one who will use them most. This provision, together with the equally important one of avoiding every unnecessary step, is the basis of success in arranging a kitchen which, whether simple or elaborate, will make the war bride's lot a truly happy one" (page 38).

In a 1946 article on the "Kitchens of yesterday and tomorrow" (Somerset, 1946), it was reported that "From overseas come books, magazines, booklets and catalogues, telling of the wonders that are being evolved for the better working of the entire house but particularly for improvements in the service quarters." These designs were illustrations of the "fact that in recent years the kitchen has undergone a complete transformation in character":

"From being regarded as the domain of the cook, the maid and the cat, the kitchen has become the workshop of the mistress. The old cry of the irate cook, 'You keep out of my kitchen', has given way to the invitation, 'Do come in and see my kitchen.' Moreover it is too true that in former times scant consideration was given to the comfort and convenience of the maids who spent their days and most of their evenings in the kitchen - hot by day and badly lighted at night" (1946).

The article included sketches from the Architectural Forum of two different kitchens (figure 6). The first showed "the ultra-modern, de-luxe 'factory' - all glass and glitter", which was contrasted with the second, "the efficient workshop in which the equipment is arranged on more conservative lines." The caption accompanying the images revealed that a poll conducted by McCall's magazine had found that "a majority of women voted for the quieter scene" (Somerset, 1946).

From the literature coming from international architects, manufacturers, and designers "which ranges from clamant advertising to optimistic forecast", the author noted that:

"Kitchen planning will tend more and more to (a) include and improve the facilities for taking meals in the kitchen area; (b) link the dining room and the garden with the kitchen; (c) place the kitchen so as to provide an outlook on to the near garden or (note our cover design) the distant view, if any. In California the out-of-doors aspect is, of course, more noticeable than in England ..." (1946).

Although the spaces within the kitchen themselves became more transparent – 'ovens with glass doors are almost commonplace ..." - a total merging of the kitchen with the rest of the house was not yet (and perhaps never would be) possible:

"In England at the moment wartime conditions not yet overcome, have made some curious economies of space necessary. In one magazine is the photograph of a combined kitchen and bathroom but, at the other extreme, the current issue of 'Ideal Homes' reproduces a photograph of a kitchen which is backed by the bathroom..." (1946).

Although not embracing the combined kitchen - bathroom, Joanna, modern heroine of the AHB, was indeed planning her ideal house around the kitchen. Starting out by "reading everything she could get hold of and looking at her friends' houses with more attention than usual" (Seymour, 1945a, page14), Joanna then began "to visualise some of the things she would like to have in her house":

"A nice big living room with doors direct into the garden so that one did not have to go out of the front or back doors every time was the central theme. She wouldn't cram her style with a mere dinette but would insist on a dining room big enough to have friends to dinner occasionally. A modern kitchen, of course, and somewhere out of doors, a spot both sunny and sheltered which could be reached from all three, so that one could take lunch or afternoon tea outside without any fuss and without having to tear through the entire house to get more hot water or the cheese or the jam. Bedrooms she was rather hazy about. It did not seem to matter much about them so long as they were near the bathroom - a modern bathroom of course - but she would like the bathroom to be out of sight of the front door. She remembered a friend's house, quite a smart one too, where it could be quite embarrassing if the bathroom was accidentally left open ..." (page 14).
Figure 6. Cover of Australian Home Beautiful January 1946, ‘Kitchens of yesterday and tomorrow’ (see Somerset, 1946).
The kitchen was placed at the centre of ‘all three’: living, dining, and outdoor spaces. And, as Joanna’s ‘haziness’ on bedrooms shows, the centrality given to the boudoir and parlour in the Victorian-era house had been devolved to the new zones of living room, courtyard, and patio in the postwar middle-class home. The bedroom in the middle-class home was marginal at this time in comparison with the emphasis placed on the living areas. The bedroom was hardly somewhere that other people would experience the occupant’s subjectivity. This discourse of self-expression through discerning consumption and generating the ‘right look’ reflects an increasing exteriorisation of the self through consumption and display. Nicholas Brown has suggested that “the transparency of the modern home was crucially mediated by women, and by feminised preoccupations with social standing, refined further and further away from the (masculine) world of occupation and closer to the (feminine) search for personality” (1995, page 17). This modern search for personality through consumption, however, also produced housewifery as an occupation.

But the process of dreaming about the perfect kitchen sometimes revealed a wish to transcend this occupation too. Many articles discuss designs and projects to get the kitchen to do the work by itself, particularly in plans that anticipate machinery to eliminate dirt and rubbish from the home. An exhibition home featured in the August 1946 issue of AHB was the result of “more than 100 manufacturers, engineers and designers exhibiting their best and most advanced products and materials. Germ-killing equipment, inter-phone system, built-in radios and television set, automatic dish-washing and waste-disposal units, infra-red bathroom fixtures - these are but a few of the many gadgets contained in the experimental house” (AHB 1946, page 19).

The kitchens in the series of model houses described in AHB resemble the control centre of a spaceship, with pedal-operated hot and cold water outlets for the sink, and the placement of a large windscreen-like window above the work space (figure 6).

“The kitchen contains numerous labor-saving and step-conserving devices. Stain-proof walls are lined with plastic roll-up doors. The model stands beside a jet-propelled dish-washer. Jets of hot water propel the dishes in sudsy water. Sink is equipped with electric waste disposal unit. The range, at left, has four rear gas burners, with work space in front. Frozen food container, air-vented vegetable container, table-height refrigerator, a sterilizing lamp, a ‘sewing centre’ are a few of the other features” (AHB 1946, page 19).

The object of new technologies for cooking and cleaning was to eliminate labour, yet they did not necessarily eliminate the figure of the housewife herself. The AHB believed that, as futuristic as the 1950s kitchen looked to its readers, “it will be as outmoded as the hand-pump within a couple of decades”.

“Ranges are on the drawing boards now which will defrost frozen meals and heat them all in a minute. This will mean an end to hot kitchens and unpleasant odors. Housewives will buy these meals in partly cooked form, and this will wipe out tiresome cooking and endless preparation … .

Then kitchens will become of less importance. In fact, meal preparation may be so simplified in another 20 years that the kitchen may be brought into the living room. There it will occupy a corner behind cupboard doors. The hostess will come home with the guests, and with martini in hand she will gaily chat away and whip up that meal in two minutes” (AHB 1951).

The article concluded that “All this may sound like dream stuff to you, but it is only dream stuff because it is a few years ahead.” The process of dreaming about the modern home was portrayed as a gendered activity, appearing in this dream as the point of intersection between mass production and individual agency. The dream of the future housewife was to become the absolute consumer: consumption without labour is figured here as the terminal point of modernisation. This is exemplified by the narrative of the kitchen developed in the magazines: a space transformed from slave’s dungeon, to laboratory, to neatly stowed cupboard. The housewife is still visible at the end of the narrative, despite the fact that her role as a cook has been simplified to a mere pusher of a few buttons on the microwave, for all that domesticity - now a practice of display and appearance - even though a proper task for a modern subject, was still women's activity.
Conclusion
In this survey of narratives surrounding the transformation of the postwar home, it is apparent that the gendering of home design produced a new agency for women. This agency was informed by a new social intelligence or set of knowledges accorded to the female subject in the home. The woman in the home was encouraged to become a small-scale utopianist and a technician of space, whose work, just as much as in other more traditional kinds of housework, was to dream about and plan the perfect home. In a parallel move towards the modernisation and democratisation of domesticity, the architect was becoming the judge of good home design, but not the source of its imagining. The modern home was construed as giving visual pleasure to its occupants, as well as allowing them to inhabit both inside and outside, amalgamating certain versions of the public and private based on a middle-class identity. The housewife's task was to understand these latest ideas and adapt them to her family's needs in three important ways. First, women became increasingly responsible for tasteful home decoration, mediating the wild profusion of goods in the market to construe proper consumerism as an expression of 'self', a reflection of the well-cultivated inner person. Second, women's participation in the modern world was figured as the modernisation of domesticity, which entailed a fascination with the previously 'backstage' activities of cooking and cleaning. Third, the interior design discourse translated wider social changes into an everyday version of modernity particular to women's culture in the postwar period.

It is this precise and yet uneven reception of these phenomena of modernity which propels the figure of the housewife into a dynamic and unstable position. She was invoked to stand in for the feminine per se, thereby limiting female subjectivity to domesticity. At the same time, the increase in domestic rhythms and the scale of image flows between public and private in the Australian domestic demonstrate that this space was no longer given as a container for women's subjectivity. As the shape of women's desires and aspirations was written in these popular cultural forms of the 1950s, a collision between feminity and female agency was bound to emerge from these curious and contradictory enfoldings of public and private.

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