Daidokoro Monogatari: Stories of the Japanese House from the Kitchen

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Gender perspective as a theoretical framework

Contemporary living conditions are just a snapshot of an ever-changing social apparatus. A cloud of preconceptions manifests itself in the form of expectations when designing a house, revealing that architectural practice is gender-charged. It is embedded in a particular cultural context at a specific historical moment and is therefore affected by assumptions that link certain behaviors as appropriate for the sexed body[1]. These gender norms are part of the set of rules codified as spatial arrangements. In particular, residential architecture incorporates cultural notions of family, which are closely related to the roles assigned to each member. Japan presents a fertile ground if we are to analyze the detached house. It is not only notable for the quantity of houses built, but also for their quality. Some of the most memorable works of architecture are Japanese detached houses. However, although they enjoy worldwide recognition for their innovative proposals and have been intensively examined in terms of their aesthetic attributes, their gender dimension remains relatively unexplored.

The gender-critical perspective is a fundamental tool for revealing unknown qualities and problematizing assumed models in order to make visible how hidden dynamics are embodied in their spatial configurations. It questions the meaning of current normative assumptions and how architect-designed houses help imagine alternative lifestyles, challenging patriarchal and hierarchical notions. In these houses, the kitchen constitutes a key element of experimentation which embodies the disruption of conventions around gender roles. It best discloses the disturbances of domestic territories that follow the dichotomist paradigm of masculine and feminine attuned to behaviors within the house.

Taking study cases from the postwar era to the contemporary period, the article will reveal a new approach to the Japanese house, telling its story (*monogatari*) from the kitchen (*daidokoro*). The first section sets the critical framework from a gender perspective, briefly reviewing architects who have claimed social change through housing. It situates this discussion alongside the specificities of the Japanese context and the construction of the nuclear family in its physical representation, the detached house, to finally pose how the historical evolution of the Japanese kitchen reveals the interplay between design, democratization, and domestic life. The second section unravels the different strategies that projects devised by Japanese architects have adopted to disrupt gender assumptions, exploring the various approaches they take to propose other ways of inhabiting, with the kitchen as a critical space.

Rethinking the house for social change

At the beginning of the twentieth century, “what is a house?” and “what is a family?” were two almost-equivalent questions. Progressive architects saw the private house as an urgent subject of discussion. Rethinking the domestic space would help advance towards an ideal society: classless and genderless. In 1924, the German architect Bruno Taut wrote *The New Dwelling: Woman as Creator*, (*Die neue Wohnung: Die Frau als Schöpferin*) criticizing Victorian houses and appointing women as the leading performers of modern living. Four years later, Sigfried Giedion published his manifesto *Liberated Dwelling* (*Befreites Wohnen*), aspiring to emancipate society “from the house that devours a woman’s labor”. Karel Teige continued scrutinizing the political organization of the house in *Minimum Dwelling* (*Nejmenší byt*, 1932), proposing to end social inequality by giving each inhabitant a private unit and exporting all caring activities to communal facilities. Karel Teige’s text is perhaps the most radical in framing the domestic spatial arrangement in terms of gender. Quoting Marx and Engels, Teige critiques how the bourgeoisie family structure is based on women’s hidden labor, since they are the ones who carry the burden of domestic work that prevents them for taking part in public production.

In Japan, Miho Hamaguchi, with her book *Feudalism in Japanese Houses* (*Nihon jūtaku no hōkensei*, 1949), was the architect who claimed the private house as the way of changing the status of women in Japanese society[2]. She saw in house design the opportunity to propose a new way of living, understanding modernity not as a reconfiguration of traditional gender roles but in fact as a tool that would help dissolve established hierarchies, with a strong rejection of the feudal system. Hamaguchi focused on the domestic unit as a site of power relations informed by spatial organization. She targeted the kitchen as the key element to achieve this aim. After her, other Japanese architects used their proposals to express critiques of the spatial conditions that came with the new gender roles of the postwar period. In 1968, Takashi Kurosawa in his article *What is the compartment group dwelling?* (*Koshitsu-Gun Jukyo towa nanika*) questioned the contradictions inherent in modern housing linked to the modern family format, predicting that this scheme would eventually collapse. Like Teige, Kurosawa suggested separate rooms for each individual, registering the independent life of the couple. Similarly, in his famous “Capsule Manifesto” (1969), Kisho Kurokawa explored the reduction of the family to the individual. This proposal was intended for a transient businessman where domesticity is exported out of the home so that it is no longer necessary.

Japanese housing transition: from nuclear family to *jendaa furii*

The modernization of Japan following the Industrial Revolution divided citizens into two separated spheres: male and female. As Hamaguchi noticed, traditional Japanese house arrangements inherited spatial articulations of previous feudal structures where priority was given to the rooms used by the master of the house, and women were associated with housekeeping[3]. This separation corresponds to a gender dualism that creates social, political, and economic inequality. Yet it was during the economic growth period, between the 1950s and the 1970s, when the standardization of the family crystallized into a well-known family pattern: husband, wife, and children. Mass-produced houses were also inevitably accompanied by images of the Japanese family and the roles that each of the members played within the dwelling[4].

The notion of the house equated to a single nuclear family flattened diversity and gave only one prospective life path as the desirable model. The brand-new “nLDK” layout housed these nuclear families—with ‘n’ for the number of bedrooms, ‘L’ for the living room, ‘D’ for the dining room, and ‘K’ for the kitchen—, accommodating the novel social norm. The male domain was associated to productive activities and the public realm, embodied in the wage earner (*salaryman*). The female domain was linked to domestic activities that revolve around the private realm of the house, embodied in the professional housewife (*sengyō shufu*)[5].

It was not until the 1990s that the Japanese scientific research started using the term ‘gender’ in order to understand the asymmetric power relations between men and women and overcome this dichotomy[6]. The Japanese-English neologism *jendaa furii* (gender-free) emerged in order to address the liberation from these deterministic and culturally established assumptions and reclaim freedom of life choices regardless of gender distinctions. With the advent of the twenty-first century, the correspondence between home and the traditional Japanese family is fading, including a greater variety of groups and individuals, from the nuclear family or single parents, to queer couples or cohabitation with non-humans.

Changes in the *daidokoro*

The original Japanese word for kitchen, *daidokoro* (台所), can be etymologically traced to the Heian period (794–1185) when aristocrats ate using small individual trays, an action recorded in writing by combining the kanji characters for platform or table and place[7]. When industrialization entered the house, it brought with it a new name: *kitchin*. This phonetic adaptation of the English term through its transcription using katakana characters highlighted the Western origin of the notion, conveying a novel understanding of this room as more compact, efficient, and hygienic. The new *kitchin* also brought social concerns, with a growing number of housing studies focusing on design to lighten the burden of domestic work on women. In “The Housewife and the Kitchen”, the historian Kiyosi Hirai notes that Japanese architects began considering kitchen

arrangements in conjunction with the labor of women as early as the 1890s[8]. At the center of the debate by these reformers was the relationship between behavior and spatial characteristics. Their conceptualization of the problem revolved around the assumption that women, in their role as housewives, would spend long hours cooking.

The idea of the kitchen as the ultimate workplace within the home took hold during the Taishō period (1912–26), becoming a central aspect of Japanese domestic science. Concurrently, the shift from the use of wood or coal to gas altered body movements. Changing the source of energy meant also changing the position from squatting to standing, a shift which also aligned with the rationale of easing domestic work[9]. New elements, such as the sink or the stove, further contributed to the rationalization project, in the fashion of the 'Frankfurt kitchen'. From the early Shōwa era (1926–1989) architectural competitions flourished in women's magazines, deploying flow line diagrams and functional kitchen arrangements. The direct application of efficiency ideals to traditional multifunctional rooms, prompted the separation between sleeping and eating, working and living, family and non-family members, affecting the gender performativity of the house.

Work station

Although the reformist aspirations outlined above were debated among intellectuals, at the beginning of the twentieth century only the wealthy bourgeoisie could afford to inhabit houses designed following such principles. In these privileged houses, the kitchen was the realm of the maid—*jochū* (女中) composed of the *kanji* for 'woman' and 'interior'—who usually was a young underprivileged rural migrant. Perceived as an external agent, an intruder in the family circle, she accessed the house from an exterior back door, and circulated only between her small sleeping room and the working area. This arrangement was driven by an effort to create a service wing segregated from the family's living quarters. Architects like Kameki and Nobuko Tsuchiura, who studied abroad and worked together with overseas architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, imported International Style ideas into house design. In their own house built in 1935, their pioneering kitchen design was less labor-intensive but still assumed a live-in maid. Nobuko Tsuchiura, who was the first Japanese woman working as an architect in Japan, soon became a public figure, sharing in women's magazines the virtues of her new, compact, and time-saving cooking space[10]. [Fig. 01]

Despite these innovations, the kitchen of the *Tsuchiura House* remained a service core, connected directly to the maid's bedroom, the flight of stairs leading to the bathroom, the laundry room, and the rear entrance, but completely independent from the rest of the house. Perfectly articulated to make the work easier, it had a steel sink and lots of built-in drawers. Technological advancements were also introduced: the owners could make requests from the master bedroom directly to the kitchen through an intercom, controlling the space through sound. The partition wall between the kitchen and the dining room had a small sliding panel from where prepared dishes appeared, hiding both the act of cooking and the cook's body. It also integrated a spinning platform with a phone that the maid operated. Answering calls and processing messages renders the kitchen as a mini office. Although otherwise an isolated working capsule, a window above the sink provided diffused light from the north and a peaceful view of the swaying treetops. The Tsuchiuras' kitchen brought foreign ideals of modernity into the Japanese context, becoming a perfect working machine but failing to dissolve the inherited hierarchy embedded in this room.

Interior hinge

The end of World War II triggered the struggle over class and gender equality to regain momentum in Japan. With the rise of a new middle class and the disappearance of the figure of the maid, the professional housewife (*sengyō shufu*) was expected to take responsibility for all domestic chores[11]. When the Japan Housing Corporation started the postwar reconstruction with so-called *danchi* apartments, architects such as Miho Hamaguchi envisioned this opportunity to apply new democratic ideals to the spatial organization of the household[12]. She regarded domestic space as a tool of liberation from conservative gender roles, leaving behind feudal relations. At this juncture, technological development allowed for servants to be replaced by electric appliances[13], and western furniture was also introduced in new formats: the kitchen-dining arrangement[14]. This configuration gave visibility to cooking behaviors that could now be performed in relation to other domestic activities.

In House O, built in 1951, Masako Hayashi transforms the kitchen into the core of all interior spaces. Designed for a widowed mother and four children, the absence of the father figure results in a new centrality, no longer occupied by the guest room (*kyakuma*) but the kitchen. Its position after the *genkan*, or entrance, breaks with the conventional Japanese understanding of depth (*oku*) and therefore takes on the representational role of receiving guests. By challenging the kitchen's sequential position within the house, the connections with other rooms are multiplied. This enhancement of domestic work is also evident in the counter, which incorporates a sewing machine. Movement inside the house always passes through, or can be seen, from the kitchen[15]. The sound of water running, or dishes being washed at the sink, travels to every corner in the house. Facing the western patio, the kitchen is a comfortable and sunny space, with a row of windows running the entire length of the counter. Diffused light comes from a skylight in the ceiling, which can also be lit with hidden bulbs at night. [Fig. 02]

Also displaying openness, with the kitchen behaving as an interior hinge, Toyo Ito designed his own house connected to the green surroundings[16]. In the Silver Hut (1984) the kitchen is placed in the corner, articulating living and sleeping quarters, daytime and night-time activities, private and communal life. A large, vaulted space with a large table in the middle, welcomes shared meals. Significantly, this central table is the only built-in furniture in a house characterized by its lightness. Made of four concrete legs and a thin tabletop, it is equipped with electric outlets that can be used for dining as well as working. Light comes from the courtyard and through several colored skylights, with a window gazing into the backyard. The kitchen becomes the vital locus of the house, acting as the room to celebrate cooking and eating. [Fig. 03]

Just a piece of furniture

In 1958, Kiyonori Kikutake envisioned Sky House as the perfect shelter for his marital life. The dwelling is a single room suspended in the air, where furniture characterizes each use. The main stage of the space is the bed, while the kitchen is reduced from a room to mere equipment: it mutates into the kitchenette, a compact movable unit plugged into the central space. The possibility of altering its position added the dimension of time to the kitchen's materiality. The bathroom, and later the children bedroom, joined this constellation of compact elements orbiting around the couple's room. Unexpected relationships thus appear, merging the space of sexuality, embodied by the marital bed, with cooking or eating spheres. [Fig. 04]

This trajectory of size reduction also led to 'kitchen multiplication'. In House Aida-Sou, designed by Katsuhiro Miyamoto in 1995, a woman, her two daughters, two lodgers and six dogs share life in a detached dwelling. The design reflects this heterogeneous membership in a variety of situations, carefully balancing the individual and the collective. Two kitchenettes are positioned along a spiral corridor ramp, enclosing a central courtyard, whereas the ground floor features a shared kitchen with a large dining table, encouraging non family-related inhabitants to share cooking activities as a common resource. [Fig. 05]

Fostering conviviality through the diversification of individual and communal kitchens is achieved in Yokohama Apartment (2009) by On Design and Erika Nakagawa. Seen from the street, a steel kitchen counter stands in the middle of a double-height open floor, reminiscent of the *doma* of the farmer's house, an earthen-floored kitchen space[17]. While each of the four units upstairs are equipped with a sink and small electric stove, this ground-floor kitchen is used for holding exhibitions and events, behaving as a communal plaza for different tenants. [Fig. 06]

Environmental voyeurism

Takamitsu Azuma tackles the challenge of rethinking domestic space for the nuclear family through the design of his own home in the frenetic heart of Tokyo. Built in 1966, Tower House is not only innovative for the early use of concrete in Japanese domestic architecture but also for its kitchen. Compression and expansion happen side-by-side in this nine-square-meter room, combining a low ceiling above the cooking appliances with a double-height space in the sitting area. After passing through the exterior

threshold formed by a few stairs, the house is accessed directly through the kitchen, thus the inhabitants must always pass through it. A window faces straight out onto the busy tree-lined street, opening this small room onto the urban realm and transforming its typically secluded tasks into 'street cooking'. Azuma's daughter, Rie Azuma, also an architect and who still lives in the house, recalls kitchen memories in a recent video interview: "My mother used to cook here. She said that she liked to look outside while cooking"[18]. Positioned slightly above ground level and sheltered by the concrete shading façade, the cook is empowered by the views, while also being afforded a degree of privacy from the curiosity of pedestrians. [Fig. 07]

Likewise, Kumiko Inui's House M plays a voyeuristic role in the urban setting but in an inverse way[19]. Built in 2015 on a thin plot forked between two roadways, the kitchen space has full-height windows open to both of them. Also designed for a couple with a child, this kitchen behaves as a transparent stage floating above the street, exhibiting intimate scenes of family life to passers-by and neighbors. Upon the explicit wishes of the dwellers, indoor performance is fully exposed to the public in the manner of an urban stage, encouraging interactions with passing strangers. This welcoming attitude is strengthened by the strategic placement of a long bench for public use on the ground floor. [Fig. 08]

However, if we seek a house in which subverting the relationship subject-object is one of the premises of the project, this is Pony Garden, designed in 2008 by Atelier Bow-Wow for a retired woman and her pony. The building stands in the corner of the plot, with the kitchen positioned in a diagonal loggia, overlooking the pasture, and so becoming the perfect place to interact with the pony[20]. Cooking, sitting, and eating become behaviors that are carried out in the pony's company, with the possibility for actions such as preparing one's own meal and feeding the pony to happen in a synchronized way. The kitchen thus acts as the threshold between the street and garden, living and dining, and also human–animal interactions. [Fig. 09]

Critical dissolution

Parallel to the previous kitchen stories, there is another thread in which the aspiration is for the kitchen to disappear almost entirely. This notion of dissolution triggered innovative assemblages that led to unforeseen situations. Three years ago, the architect Ippei Takahashi stretched the concept of the kitchen to its limits. In a Tokyo dwelling composed by eight tiny apartments, the kitchen is no longer assumed to be an essential space but becomes a merely optional commodity. Each unit possesses an idiosyncratic set of amenities: some have a bathtub, others a make-up mirror, and others a tatami floor, with just two of the units incorporating an actual kitchen. [Fig. 10] In these set of customized apartments, hyper-specialized for different lifestyles, space is reduced to a minimum. As a result, the kitchen is framed as a hobby, only present in the living spaces of those who actually enjoy cooking. For the rest of the tenants, it is substituted by the city's vast network of convenience stores and restaurants.

This approach invokes the radical thinking of Toyo Ito and Kazujo Sejima in the 1980s in their project Pao for the Tokyo Nomad Woman. It was commissioned as part of an exhibition at the Seibu Department Store in Tokyo[21], where the question was precisely: "What is a kitchen?". Ito and Sejima dismantled the conventional notion of home by targeting an innovative subject: independent women living in the city, floating in a "sea of consumption"[22]. Through this theoretical exercise, the architects confronted the notions of kitchen, house, and city, arriving at a dynamic synthesis as opposed to static settlement.

House design as means to challenge gender norms

Using critical gender perspectives to review different design strategies followed by Japanese architects in their eagerness to alter assumed domestic configurations reveals that aspects such as visibility, connectivity, and inclusion transcend mere functionality. From the twentieth century to the present day, the kitchen, a vital space that condenses many of the power relations that occur in the domestic sphere, undergoes various mutations.
It opens towards the interior and then becomes a passageway space that gradually opens towards the exterior until it connects directly with the outside environment. This change in the orientation of the kitchen (first inward and then outward) is followed by its displacement from the core of the house to its removal from the domestic sphere.

The earlier approach was the recognition of the kitchen as a workplace and its subsequent optimization from the perspective of efficiency, best represented in the Tsuchiura's own home. However, to challenge its conventional hidden and isolated position, different projects began to reconfigure the sequential relationships of the kitchen with the other spaces in the house. This is evident in Masako Hayashi's House O, where the kitchen opens up to the interior, becoming a central hinge that articulates family life and celebrates domestic tasks.

The compression of this room to the scale of a piece of furniture allows for mobility, as in Sky House for example, which turns the kitchen into something temporary and alterable. In House Aida-Sou, the kitchenette also brings the possibility of multiplying its number; by placing one per inhabitant, the premise of being in a space for the exclusively performativity of one person, usually the housewife, is dissolved. The opposite strategy, that of reducing the number, appears in co-housing projects such as Yokohama Apartment, encouraging relationships between non-family members around a shared kitchen.

Another destabilizing tactic is the exploration of its visual connection to the outside environment, exposing previously hidden domestic behaviors to the public sphere, as in Inui's House M, or integrating scenes of urban life as a background in the preparation of meals, as in the case of the Tower House. Finally, projects such as the House Apartment or Pao for the Nomad Woman even question the need for this space by radically removing or displacing its existence, exporting it to the urban environment.

Through these stories, the kitchen is revealed as the most critical room in the Japanese house, since its reformulation is a challenge to the values and practices of domesticity. Through their imaginative configurations, Japanese houses have acted as vectors of social change, examining the family unit, subverting gender norms, interrogating issues of class and economy, articulating new relationships, and awakening inventive proposals.

1. Judith Butler problematizes this notion in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* arguing how gender is not a quality attributed to an already pre-existing subject because of this subject's biological characteristics, but rather something that is produced through repetitive enactment or "performance" in response to discursive forces.
2. Miho Hamaguchi was a pioneering woman architect in Japan. She was the first to obtain an architectural license and the first to open her own independent office. Interestingly, she spent the last years of her career between Japan and Spain.
3. Kiyosi Hirai. *The Japanese House Then and Now* (Tokyo: Ichigaya Publications, 1998), 77.
4. Yoshiharu Tsukamoto, "Family Critiques", in *The Japanese House: Architecture and Life after 1945* (Tokyo: Shinkenchiku-sha, 2017), 37.
5. Chizuko Ueno. *The Modern Family in Japan. Its Rise and Fall* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2009).
6. The concept of gender is used in Japanese social research by feminist scholars to include both sexes in the discussion of power relations and criticize a duality that does not allow in-between male or female identities.
7. "Kitchen History," (*Kitchin no rekishi*), Japan Association of Kitchen and Bath, accessed April, 2020, https://www.kitchen-bath.jp/statistics/knowmore.html
8. Kiyosi Hirai. Op. cit., 83.
9. Jordan Sand, *House and Home in Modern Japan: Architecture, Domestic Space and Bourgeois Culture, 1880–1930*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 55-94.
10. Nobuko Tsuchiura was the first woman architect to practice in Japan. She studied abroad under Frank Lloyd Wright. On returning to Tokyo, Nobuko and her husband, Kameki, collaborated with Wright in the design of the Imperial Hotel (*teikoku hoteru*). Nobuko Ogawa and Atsuko Tanaka. *Big Little Nobu: Wright's disciple and female architect Nobuko Tsuchiura* (*Biggu, ritoru, Nobu: Raito no deshi, joseikenchikuka Tsuchiura Nobuko*) (Tokyo: Domesu Shuppan, 2001).
11. Emiko Ochiai. *The Japanese Family System in Transition: A Sociological Analysis of Family Change in Postwar Japan* (Tokyo: LTCB International Library Foundation, 1997).
12. Noemí Gómez Lobo, "Two Houses and Two Women Challenging Domesticity in Modern Japan", in *The 16th International DOCOMOMO Conference Tokyo Japan 2020+1 Proceedings*, eds. Ana Tostões and Yoshiyuki Yamana (Tokyo: DOCOMOMO, 2021), 1498-1503.
13. Elizabeth Diller, "Bad Press", in *Gender, Space and Architecture,* ed. Iain Borden, Barbara Penner, and Jane Rendell, (London: Routledge, 2000), 12. As Diller states, the housewife became "the 'home economist' in the modern sense, combining the skills of nutritionist, doctor, accountant, child-care

specialist, and informed consumer, among others."
14. Keiko Kitagawa. *Dining Kitchen wa Koushite Tanjo shita: Josei Kenchikuka Miho Hamaguchi ga Mesashita mono* (*The process of Dining-Kitchen: What Miho Hamaguchi, the First Architect, Aimed at*) (Tokyo: Gihōdō Shuppan, 2002).
15. Masako Hayashi, "My Architectural Method: Excerpts from a Lecture", in *Masako Hayashi (Modern Architect),* (Tokyo: SD Kajima Publishing, 1981), 10-12.
16. This kitchen is in stark contrast to the house he designed for his sister and nieces a few meters away. In White U (1976), the kitchen is enclosed and the relationship with the outside is non-existent.
17. Takeshi Nakagawa. *La casa japonesa: espacio, memoria y lenguaje* (Barcelona: Reverté, 2016), 39-47.
18. "Takamitsu Azuma's House, A 50-year-old legend", accessed April 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xasKnR95r4g&t=133s
19. Beatriz Colomina, "The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism", in *Sexuality and Space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 73-80. Colomina describes Adolf Loos's interiors, reading the house as a spatial artifact that holds in itself the power to create or cancel human interactions. To reveal "the hidden mechanisms" embedded in architecture, Colomina narrates the spatial relations of sequence and visibility within the house. She gives particular emphasis to the journey of the gaze, stating: "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." Architecture is one of the means that can coerce or stimulate people to perform certain behaviors.
20. Atelier Bow-Wow, "House Genealogy, Atelier Bow-Wow: All 42 Houses", *Japan Architect*, 85 (Spring 2012), 114.
21. Toyo Ito, *Toyo Ito Architecture 1971–2001,* (Tokyo: Toto, 2013).
22. John Arango Flórez and Natalia Pérez Orrego, "Espacios desde objetos. Relaciones entre modos de vida y arquitectura a través de muebles", *Iconofacto* 12, no. 19 (December 2016), 170-194.

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