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 sexes. 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 elaborated on his manifesto by assuming the political organization of the house in Minimum Dwelling (Njemnisi 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, Mihō Hamaguchi, with her book Feudalism in Japanese Houses (Nihon jítaku no hôkensei, 1949), was the architect who claimed the private house as the way of changing the status of women in Japanese society. 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’s work 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 nuclear family pattern: husband, wife, and children. 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), Kioko Kurokawa explored the reduction of the family to the individual. This proposal was intended for a transient way of living, 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. 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.

The notion of the house equated to a single nuclear family flattened diversity and gave only one prospective 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 revolved around the private realm of the house, embodied in the professional housewife (sengō shūja). 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. 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 distinction.

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 are using small individual trays, an action recorded in writing by combining the kanji characters for platform or table and place. 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 Kyōsai Hirai notes that Japanese architects began considering kitchen...
arrangements in conjunction with the labor of women as early as the 1890s. 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, 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 squattting to standing, a shift which also aligned with the rationale of easing domestic work. 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 bourgeois could afford to inhabit houses designed following such principles. In these privileged houses, the kitchen was the realm of the maid—jochi (嫁) 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. Early 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. 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. 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, and western furniture was also introduced in new formats: the kitchen-dining arrangement. 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 (oka) 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. 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 window is a veritable 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.

Also displaying openness, with the kitchen behaving as an interior hinge, Toyo Ito designed his own house connected to the green surroundings. 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.

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.

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.

Fostering cosmivisuality 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-floor kitchen space. 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.

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 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 way21. 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 small child, this kitchen behaves as a transparent threshold floating above the street, exhibiting the visual connection to the outside environment but 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 certain 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, 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 performative 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.

5. 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 notion of the kitchen to its limits. In Sky House for example, which turns the kitchen into something temporary and alterable.

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.


10. Nobuko Tsuchiura was the first 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.


specialist, and informed consumer, among others.”
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.
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.

Domestic Space
House design
Kitchen
Gender
Japanese architecture.