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Review of "The Food Axis: Cooking, Eating, and the Architecture of American Houses" by E.C. Cromley

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instruction could be as much as three times as costly as boys' since the curriculum involved lessons in arts such as needlework and music and thus frequently required the purchase of expensive instruments and materials (pp. 13–14). Occasionally, even boys attended what were nominally girls' schools; one of the catalogue entries features an 1821 sampler made by William Frederic Tuttle, a well-educated man who eventually became a Yale classics professor.

The cultural role of decorative needlework shifted over time, moving from a mark of established status to an instrument of social advancement. The demographics of the makers gradually widened, especially after 1820, as daughters of less prosperous families gained greater access to education and utilized needlework as a “passport to gentility” (p. 14).

Schoelwer tells intriguing stories about the works and their makers that sometimes reveal complex connections between people of different geographical, cultural, and economic backgrounds. One candlewick bedcover made by a sea captain's wife, for example, was worked with cotton sent by a southern woman in gratitude for the safe delivery of her child as she traveled on the captain's ship. As Schoelwer concludes, “these works connect us emotionally to long-past lives, reminding us of constants in human existence—schooling, growing up, preparing for marriage, birth, and death—even as they confront us with different practices or understandings of these experiences” (p. 15). We might wish for a greater understanding of technique as part of the makers' daily lives and for contextualization of Connecticut needlework in relation to other places, but overall it is refreshing to see scholarship that takes needlework seriously as an art form. As the book jacket claims, Schoelwer's work provides a model for further needlework studies.

Beverly Gordon, *Professor of Design History and Material Culture in the Design Studies Department of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, is the author of* TEXTILES: THE WHOLE STORY (*Thames and Hudson, 2011*).

The Food Axis: Cooking, Eating, and the Architecture of American Houses. By Elizabeth Collins Cromley. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010. Pp. x, 270. \$50.00.)

For anyone who has remodeled a kitchen, who enjoys cooking, or who has simply ever wondered why American kitchens are the way

they are today, Elizabeth Collins Cromley's *The Food Axis* provides a fascinating account of architectural spaces and landscapes related to food storage, preparation, and consumption. Cromley argues that food is the engine that has driven spatial changes in American houses and their landscapes since the colonial period. She defines the food axis as "a network of related spaces above and below ground, both attached to the house and separate from it" (p. 2). The food axis goes beyond the kitchen to include locales such as the dining room, the root cellar, and the smokehouse. Drawing largely on the fields of material culture and vernacular architecture studies, Cromley looks at a range of building types built and used by people who hailed from a variety of geographic regions, socioeconomic classes, and ethnic groups. This broad approach allows her to assess both high-style and vernacular examples. In addition, Cromley incorporates recent approaches to vernacular architecture that consider change over time not just in terms of building form and style but, equally important, spatial arrangement and use. Studying food-related areas beyond the kitchen, Cromley also treats changing ideas regarding gender over the course of American history. The overall result is an inclusive exploration of residential architecture in American life.

The author employs a variety of primary and secondary sources to support her argument. Much of her research depends on fieldwork—her own and that of other scholars—examining buildings *in situ*. Measured drawings, pattern books, and photographs provide other critical evidence. In addition, Cromley draws on documents such as probate inventories, diaries, and letters to gain an understanding of how spaces were furnished and used. Prescriptive literature such as *The American Woman's Home* (1869), by Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, and architectural treatises offer normative images of the ideal household in different eras. Finally, the author builds on more than thirty years of scholarship on material culture and vernacular architectural history, including her own work on early apartment buildings.

Cromley traces general patterns of how the food axis has changed from the seventeenth to the early twenty-first century. In colonial times, many houses, especially small ones, had a single room that accommodated multiple functions: cooking and eating food, socializing, and sleeping. Around the turn of the eighteenth century, families with the means to build larger homes began organizing space around function. Separate kitchens were built, later accompanied by adjoining dining rooms. Regional and class differences, of course, played

a role in this specialization. Lower-class families often lacked the resources to buy or rent residences with the capacity for separate dining rooms or for single-use spaces such as pantries or butteries. In warmer climates, some houses had additional summer kitchens, whereas New England homes sometimes located the kitchen in the basement. Plantations featured a number of free-standing buildings that supported food production, storage, and consumption—including smokehouses, icehouses, and root cellars.

In the nineteenth century, industrialization spurred technological innovations in the home. Coal-burning ranges, for example, helped reshape the spatial organization of the food axis as more functions moved inside the house. Newer utilities such as indoor plumbing, gas, and electricity made domestic work more convenient and spawned the invention of numerous small appliances intended to make the servant's or housewife's domestic work more economical. As Cromley observes, however, greater efficiency also raised expectations regarding cleanliness and put increased demands on the women of the house.

In the early twentieth century, the rise of the field of home economics and its concomitant emphasis on spatial efficiency led to the construction of smaller kitchens still closed off from the dining room. Changing attitudes regarding the role of women in the family gradually encouraged the opening up of this room to other parts of the house (i.e., the dining room and living room) so that women would not be sequestered in the kitchen. By the mid-twentieth century, modern architecture's advocacy of the open plan had influenced design in many mainstream houses, making such kitchens common even across class lines as domestic space became less formal overall. Cromley notes astutely that this return to multiple functions is not unlike what had existed in eighteenth-century houses or in nineteenth-century tenements.

The Food Axis has few flaws. The author's clear prose makes her book accessible to a wide-ranging audience beyond architectural and social historians. Overall, the book is nicely designed, boasting a clean layout and clear images. Numerous photographs and floor plans accompany the text, though the reader may wish for more pictures. Fortunately, Cromley clearly describes interiors not illustrated in the book. The last chapter, which addresses more current examples of the food axis, lacks the historical perspective of the book's previous sections and ignores some developments of the past few years. The author devotes more time here to examining large houses than

smaller, modest homes. Although the trend in American residential construction has been to build larger abodes, recent economic uncertainty and a growing awareness of environmental costs point to a reversal in the bigger-is-better ethos. How have sustainable design, the resurgence in home vegetable gardens, and denser residential development in some cities affected the food axis? Cromley does not say. Nevertheless, *The Food Axis* is a welcome addition to the scholarship on American domestic architecture and social history.

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Jonathan Fisher of Blue Hill, Maine: Commerce, Culture, and Community on the Eastern Frontier. By Kevin D. Murphy. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010. Pp. xvi, 288. \$49.95.)

Jonathan Fisher was an extraordinary figure: a frontier parson struggling to anchor his congregation against the winds of religious change. More significant than his clerical career, however, was his secular struggle to invent, as Kevin Murphy puts it, “a personal and professional identity for himself” (p. 1). Murphy uses a diverse array of material artifacts to show how this Harvard-educated entrepreneur used his talents as painter, architect, surveyor, and writer to supplement a meager pastor’s income and to secure a position atop Blue Hill’s attenuated social hierarchy. Previous writers have traced the life of Jonathan Fisher in considerable detail, but Murphy’s materials-based biography adds an entirely new dimension to this complicated man.

Mulling over the personal and household effects of a long and productive life, Murphy assesses Fisher’s accomplishments and delves into his subject’s understanding of self and community. A “microhistory” based on Fisher’s home, belongings, and artistic, architectural, and literary renderings, the book brings to life the minister’s extraordinary success in adapting the artistic, scientific, and architectural training he received at Harvard to the vernacular tastes of Blue Hill, a small commercial outpost just east of Maine’s Penobscot Bay. Fisher brought to the town a technical mastery that demonstrably elevated its insular folk culture. Likewise, his prominent role in Blue Hill’s cultural, religious, social, and educational institutions helped bring civility to his hinterland society.