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Grete Lihotzky, “Rationalization in the Household” (1926-27)

Austrian architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky (1897-2000) made design history with her Frankfurt Kitchen. In 1926, she started working for Frankfurt’s Municipal Building Department, where she was involved in designing new housing as part of the “Neues Frankfurt” [New Frankfurt] urban development program, which was tasked with addressing the city’s acute housing shortage in the 1920s. Schütte-Lihotzky’s kitchen design, which incorporated modern design principles such as functionality and standardization, was first exhibited at the Frankfurt Fair in the spring of 1927. Several variations on the Frankfurt Kitchen were later installed in numerous Frankfurt housing developments. The article below appeared in the industry journal *Das Neue Frankfurt. Monatsschrift für Fragen der Großstadt-Gestaltung* [*The New Frankfurt. A Monthly Publication on Urban Development Questions*]. Published between 1926 and 1933, the journal eventually became an important medium for contemporary theories of architecture and design. Lihotzky led an eventful life, which took her to Moscow in 1930 and from there to London, Paris, Istanbul, and Sofia, among other places. She became active in the Communist resistance against the National Socialists in Vienna and narrowly escaped execution in 1942.

Rationalization in the Household

Every thinking woman must be aware of the backwardness of current methods of household management and see in them a severe impediment to her own development and therefore to the development of the family as a whole. Today’s hectic urban life-style imposes demands on women far exceeding those of the calmer conditions of eighty years ago, yet today’s woman is nevertheless condemned to manage her household (aside from the relief offered by a few exceptions) just like her grandmother did.

The problem of finding a more rational organization of the housewife’s work is of nearly equal significance for all levels of society. Both the middle-class woman, who often has to run the house without help of any kind, and the working-class woman, who frequently has to pursue an occupation outside the home, are so over-worked that over the long run it cannot but have a negative effect on the general health of the whole population.

For more than a decade women leaders have recognized the importance of relieving the housewife of unnecessary burdens and have spoken out for the central management of residential buildings, that is, for the establishment of centralized cooking facilities. They said: Why should twenty women have to shop for groceries when one can do the same for all of

them? Why should twenty women make a fire in twenty stoves when food could be prepared on one for everyone? Why should twenty women cook for twenty families when the proper organization would allow four or five persons to do the same work for twenty families? Such considerations are illuminating for every reasonable person, and they have had their effect. Buildings with centralized kitchens were constructed.

Soon, however, it became apparent that it is not possible simply to unite twenty families into one household. Aside from personal quarrels and conflicts, sharp variations in the material conditions of the respective inhabitants are unavoidable, which is why the merging of several families necessarily leads to conflicts. For workers and private employees, who are subject to unemployment at relatively short notice, the centralized kitchen arrangement is out of the question from the start, because it prevents them from lowering their standard of living to the necessary extent once they become unemployed. The problem of rationalizing the household, therefore, cannot be solved in isolation, but must go hand-in-hand with associated social considerations.

We recognize from past experience that the single-family dwelling is here to stay, but that it must also be organized as rationally as possible. The question is how to improve the traditional methods of household management, which waste both energy and time. What we can do is transfer the principles of labor-saving management developed in factories and offices, which have led to unsuspected increases in productivity, to the household. We must recognize that there is a best and simplest way to approach every task, which is therefore the least tiring as well. The three main working groups involved—housewives, manufacturers, and architects—face the important and highly responsible job of working together to discover and make feasible the simplest way of executing every household chore.

Among housewives the woman with some intellectual training is always going to work more rationally. Supported by the appropriate devices and appliances, and given that her dwelling is correctly arranged, she will quickly find the most efficient way to do her work.

Among manufacturers (with the exception of furniture builders) there are already a considerable number who have accepted the new requirements of our time and are putting labor-saving devices and appliances on the market. The greatest backwardness, however, continues to be represented in the way dwellings are furnished. Years of effort on the part of the German Werkbund and individual architects, countless articles and lectures demanding clarity, simplicity, and efficiency in furnishings, as well as a turn away from the traditional kitsch of the last fifty years, have had almost no effect whatever.

When we enter dwellings we still find the old knick-knacks and the usual inappropriate “decor.” That all the efforts to the contrary had so little practical success is primarily the fault of women, who are remarkably uninterested in the new ideas. The furniture dealers say that the customers keep on wanting the old stuff. And women would prefer to take on the extra work in order to

have a “snug and cozy” home. *The majority still takes simple and efficient to mean the same thing as dull*.

The Frankfurt housing office attempted to convince people of the contrary by displaying a completely furnished model building as a part of the exhibition, “The New Dwelling and Its Interior Structure,” at the local trades fair. The point is to prove that simplicity and efficiency are not merely labor-saving but, executed with good materials and the correct form and color, represent clarity and beauty as well.

The Frankfurt Housewives’ Association had its own display at the exhibition and it illustrated the importance of household rationalization particularly well. This part of the exhibition, called “The Modern Household,” was primarily concerned with the problem of the labor-saving kitchen. Displayed first of all was a completely furnished dining-car kitchen and sideboard, which offered a particularly instructive example of how steps and other unnecessary movements can be saved. Three more fully equipped kitchens with built-in furniture (of which the first two have been exhibited about three thousand times in Frankfurt) show how effort can be saved by proper layout and furniture arrangement. Here the three different kinds of kitchen operations were taken into account: (1) households without a maid (with annual incomes up to about 5,000 marks); (2) households with one maid (with annual incomes of up to 10,000 marks); and (3) households with two maids (with annual incomes over 10,000 marks).

Aside from wooden kitchen furnishings, the display also included a small cooking corner made of metal for bachelor apartments and a kitchen made of washable bricks; these last two kitchens represent attempts to find appropriate new materials that are less affected by external influences than wood. All of the kitchens are small, to save effort, and can be separated off completely from the dwelling’s living area. The old style of combining kitchen and living space seems to have been superseded. Also exhibited were examples of free-standing kitchen furniture that is already on the market and contributes considerably to easing household work. Good and bad household and kitchen appliances—laborwasting and labor-saving, hard and easy to clean—were identified by signs of different colors. Drying racks for bowls, plates, and cups, which save the work of drying the chinaware, and flour hoppers that dispense a specific, measured amount of flour into the bowl, represent devices that have been tried and approved by women in other countries for some time.

The exhibition devoted particular attention to electrical devices and appliances. Although not yet practical for lower income levels, we know that the not-too-distant future belongs to the electrical kitchen. The centralized electrical laundry facilities that had to be installed in the larger housing blocks should provide women with an example of the labor that can be saved, and encourage them to have smaller laundry rooms, which are already a reasonable investment for lower-income families, in their own homes. In a central washing facility in Frankfurt, the renters requested that manually operated washing machines be installed in addition to the electric ones. Now, after a year, the manually operated machines go unused, since all of the women want to do their wash in the other ones.

“The smallest bath in the smallest space,” about five feet by four, proves that the demand “a bath for every dwelling” no longer represents an unrealizable ideal. A 1:10 model of a flat demonstrates the possibility of saving room by slipping a “wash and shower stall” between two bedrooms as well as by installing a shower room requiring only five and a half square feet. The constant flow of water makes a more thorough cleansing possible than can be had in a tub.

The extensive use of natural gas in the household is illustrated by a model of a one-family house fully supplied with gas. The exhibition took special pains to investigate the important topic of good lighting in the home. How much money can be saved solely through the choice of a wallpaper designed to enhance illumination! How important it is for the health of the family that women, who represent the majority of the buyers, be directed to the correct and technically satisfactory work lamps, so that they do not keep on thoughtlessly buying the small, ornate floor lamps with dust-gathering silk shades.

It is often for the silliest reasons that we are expected to surround ourselves with badly designed things. There is, for example, a large lamp factory whose stock consists exclusively of tasteless and impractical lamps. It produces inferior models because they are needed for large-scale export to India, while the small domestic turnover in new, good models makes their production unprofitable.

Are we supposed to spend our money on these bad lamps and ruin our eyes so that local lamps can be sent to the Indian colonies?

Here, as in all things, it must be a general principle, in particular for women, not to accept thoughtlessly whatever comes on the market, not to choose things that seem pretty at the moment, but to check for appropriateness and faultless technical quality.

This exhibition should sharpen the eye for that task.

Source of English translation: Grete Lihotzky, “Rationalization in the Household” (1926-27), in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg.

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