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APPROPRIATING THE STATE ON THE COUNCIL ESTATE

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This article is concerned with the nature of consumption in an industrial society. It investigates the manner in which tenants on a London Council Estate have decorated and altered their kitchens. Striking differences in the ability of tenants to appropriate facilities provided by the council are considered in relation to gender, ethnicity and other factors. Such a perspective illustrates the dialectical nature of gender categories under certain conditions. It also highlights the dynamic potential of long-term consumption as an arena through which social groups attempt to transform alienable goods into inalienable culture, but are often unable to accomplish this goal.

Introduction: the theoretical background

The key analytical terms to be employed in this article are alienation and appropriation. These are derived from a considerable literature within which anthropologists have attempted to utilise concepts which arose out of critical debates as to the nature of industrial societies and apply them to smaller-scale communities. A key point of departure has been The gift by Mauss (1954), from which a polarity has been developed between ‘commodity’ societies, used to exemplify the state of alienation, and ‘gift’ societies, used to characterise the state of inalienability (e.g. Gregory 1982).

This polarity has been most marked in writings on the Pacific where a series of recent analyses have followed from Sahlin’s representation (1974: 149–83), following Mauss, of cultural strategies as a form of pre-emptive strike against the possibility of alienation (e.g. Munn 1977; Strathern 1985; Weiner 1985). It would seem worthwhile to utilise our understanding of such cultural strategies derived from the study of non-industrial societies, and return them to the context within which the problematic was first encountered—to see, for example, whether images of culture as inalienability can also be recovered from ethnographic study within an industrial society.

In completing this circle, a shift in the focus of concern seems warranted. In Melanesia, the formation of processes such as gender and exchange ensure that objects are integral to the formation of social relations. By contrast, given the influence of Marx on this ‘expressivist’ tradition, the main thrust of social criticism within industrial contexts has been levelled against conditions which create alienation as estrangement from the products of labour, regarded as having been invested with aspects of the social being of the producer. It should
be evident by the 1980’s, however, that this form of critical theory may by now be anachronistic. The experience of alienation as estrangement may encompass a much wider spectrum of interaction between social groups and their received environment than that of the relations of production which have been the focus of conventional socialism. Within an industrial context, the very scale of the institutions which construct and distribute its products may make alienation an intrinsic condition. In such circumstances what must be looked for are not ‘pre-emptive strikes’, but rather a response in the form of an appropriation, understood as a re-socialisation, of the artefactual environment.

The problem of housing, which provides the background to my study, exemplifies the complexity of the current relationship between society and its artefacts. Self-built housing, despite its political appeal, is never likely to be more than a minority possibility, unless we want to renew the entire housing stock at very short intervals. A theory of housing therefore has to be largely a theory of consumption. The distributive mechanisms—that is, the market and the state—are clearly problematic candidates as the direct source of social identification or affective community. This means that whether as council tenants or owner occupiers, households are likely to receive their built environment as the product of a system which would not be regarded as an investment of their social being. If they are to develop their self-conception as households and neighbourhoods it must be through some form of consumption as appropriation, though their possibilities of accomplishing this task may well be coloured by their consumption status.

The aim of this article about work on the home as consumption is therefore to excavate the nature of the value which confirms such labour as a social activity. This is not some absolute quality but rather derives from the particular position of consumption in the context of more general characterisations of industrial society. Our current notion of consumers is extremely constraining, used mainly in relation to the purchase of commodities or of status in respect to ownership, and the connotations are generally negative, a degeneration from the previous state of ‘users’ (e.g. R. Williams 1980). There is a considerable literature on what is wrong with consumption, but very little about what an activity which is integral to all industrial societies ought to be like. Consumption may, however, be reformulated in value-related terms as an ideal. One such model might involve a process by which social groups are formed around activities through which they attempt (with variable degrees of success) to render what is inevitably met as alienating when received through the distributive institutions of the nation-state, into inalienable culture (Miller 1987: 178–217). Our concern should therefore be increasingly with the manner by which relations of production and distribution contribute or constrain this project of consumption as the construction of inalienability.

The particular subject of this analysis is an aspect of the built environment in Britain. At the present time there are many incentives to establishing alternatives to the dual means of housing distribution with their consequence of potential alienation of sections of our own society from the environment which they occupy. These are a strong centralist planning bureaucracy which during the period of high modernism appears to have alienated the recipients of this
aspect of welfare state policy, and, on the other hand, a private housing market, either rented or, especially today, owner-occupied, which leaves only a declining and clearly inferior housing section to those unable to join the fray (Labour Housing Group 1984).

In developing such alternatives the drive has been towards a more participatory and dynamic relationship between planners and consumers, including different forms of collective ownership and community construction (such as housing co-operatives) or possibilities of self-build and self-control. These changes are associated with groups as diverse as the far left and the monarchy (McDonald 1986; Ward 1985). Recent academic writing on these trends (e.g. Saunders 1984; P. Williams 1986) often employs terminology such as ‘alienation’, ‘affective community’, and most recently ‘ontological security’ which evokes a process beyond the construction of housing and implies a concern with the subsequent relationship between the housing and its occupants. Here, however, research is relatively sparse. There have been participant observation projects on housing estates (e.g. Andrews 1979) but the orientation has been to the public domain and the emergence of phenomena such as tenants’ associations or the use of public facilities. The problem for research is that once the buildings are complete most of the action takes place in that rather inaccessible area behind the front doors.

Such information as is available about this long-term relationship is mainly gleaned from particular symptoms, such as the incidence of vandalism, cases of depression, differential district house prices and so forth. Often, however, this is related to specific groups within the mass and it is hard to gauge the actual heterogeneity, something which emerges strongly from research such as Tony Parker’s interview-based account of a London estate, published as The people of providence (1983). There have also been a series of user studies, usually undertaken after a relatively short period of occupation and concerned largely with the functional success of specific design features (e.g. DOE 1972, though see also Darke 1984). Exceptions have been studies based on the transformation of building forms in a wide variety of social contexts, such as King’s research into the development of the bungalow (1984), and a study of the appropriation of Le Corbusier’s ‘village’ of Le Pressac (Boudon 1972) (though this is a rather atypical case).

Description of fieldwork in a north London estate
The material which forms the basis of this study is taken from a single council estate in north London. This estate was built in the early 1970’s and consists of flats in low-rise, high-density blocks. It clearly exhibits the ‘streets in the air’ philosophy of deck-access blocks current a decade earlier, a reflection of the extended period between initial planning and completion. The estate was locally considered unfavourably as against alternative estates in the area. The atmosphere was generally unfriendly and it was known locally as a ‘valium’ estate. The initial settlement based on the first phase of building was relatively successful with a dynamic tenants’ association, many of the tenants coming
from a nearby area, but as the estate grew to the present size of over 300 flats and maisonettes conflicts emerged especially over noise and fights between estate children, who were short of play areas. The tenants’ association folded and did not arise again for a decade. Tenants noted the large number of petty quarrels between neighbours but on the other hand considered it a relatively non-violent ‘safe’ area, and some at least suggested that its negative reputation was ‘undeserved’.

I interviewed forty tenants (this was around 13 per cent. of the total, in flats ranging from bedsitters to three bedrooms). Thirty-four of them allowed me to photograph the kitchen interiors in the state they happened to be in at the time. The majority of these households were either original tenants or had lived on the estate for a decade or more; only a fifth had been less than five years on the estate. The interviews concentrated on basic background information about the household and questions regarding the kitchen, including details about patterns of use and decoration such as how individual members of the household regarded the kitchen and what activities they associated with it, the pattern of visits, attitudes to the estate, and the processes which resulted in the present pattern of decorations. The information I obtained was therefore kitchen-based, but as noted in the Mass Observation study of 1941–2, kitchens were the key determinant of general housing satisfaction (1943: 55), and remarks to that effect are common from housewives today1.

Where possible the interviews were relatively informal allowing informants to raise a variety of issues, so relatively few quantifiable forms of information were given. The aim was not a formal sample survey, but to consider qualitative factors difficult to express in language or to excavate from practices, but which might emerge as general trends. Additional background information was obtained from interviews with individuals in a position to assess the general social development of the estate such as a member of a housing action group, a caretaker and the head of the tenants’ association. I did not live on the estate but tried to observe patterns of visiting and use of public areas when possible.

The intention of my study was to examine how essentially identical facilities provided by the council have been differentially employed in the long term. The tenants started with the same blank ‘canvas’ and the data consist of their self-design over the years. One possible focus could have been on the symbolism of the decorations and the principles of ‘order’ established, but in this article the emphasis will be rather on the degree to which a particular household, faced with the provision of a range of furnishings selected by the council, appears to have engaged in some form of ‘appropriation’ through transformation and the factors which seemed to have facilitated or constrained such alterations. Almost all the kitchens were based on one of two basic patterns. Most were long but at around 2.4m width rather narrow. They already had a system of modern fitted cupboards and the normal plumbing and energy supplies, but all other facilities were provided by the tenants. At the two extremes there were cases in which the kitchen was virtually unaltered from its original state, as against cases where the occupants had thrown out all the fitments they were provided with and purchased a commercial fitted kitchen. My aim was to detect patterns in these transformations, or lack of them, and account for them.
There were limits to what the tenants could do without engaging in structural alterations given the positions of cupboards and energy and water sources. They were modern fitted kitchens with the usual worksurfaces and work ‘triangle’. Eating within the kitchens was difficult because they were long and narrow; the three-bedroom maisonettes had a hatch leading to an area of the lounge in which tenants were expected to put a table. Obvious subjects for change included the black lino floor, curtains and decorations, white wares (most had purchased fridges, cookers and washing machines) and the cupboards which, apart from the recently installed kitchens which had laminate surfaces, were of wood and hardboard and required painting.

Some relevant variables

When conducting a specific analysis within an area such as contemporary London there are a vast number of possible relevant variables and questions. Before examining the results of this enquiry, several such key areas of debate may be very briefly examined. Council estates, despite often being inspired by a variety of socialist and welfare philosophies, have commonly been regarded as having failed to promote the intended sociability. This has been associated with tenants’ consciousness that they are merely passive recipients of something which they would otherwise have wished to have control over, and indeed councils have traditionally imposed tight restrictions upon the alterations occupants are allowed to make to their properties.

Any evidence for alienation expressed in tenants’ refusal to feel ‘at home’ as occupants may be associated with an antagonism either—more narrowly—to the state as expressed in the council, or—more generally—to the condition of class and poverty such that tenants feel themselves conceived of as the symbolic ‘other’ to the private sector. The modernist image of council housing is a reflection of the control exerted by the state in general and is a reflection of the control exerted by capitalism over both the workplace and the distribution of resources (Miller 1984).

Generalisation from this situation, as found in current political debates, is problematic. It should not be assumed that tenancy is some universalistic condition, or that private ownership has some necessary ontological consequences. In affluent countries such as Sweden, West Germany and Switzerland the proportion of home ownership may be low and in others such as Canada in decline (Agnew 1981: 67). It is in Britain in particular that this relationship operates, where the house and garden have become an almost universal goal within a set of relationships between individualism and the state, and the country and the city, which are hard to assimilate to continental models (see R. Williams 1973).

The focus on the kitchen implicates another series of debates around the nature of housewifery. There has been a considerable interest in the history of the kitchen, emphasising on the one hand the development of domestic science and attempts to construct a set of normative models for kitchen use, and on the other the large number of alternative and radical schemes which challenge the
primacy of the housewife-kitchen relationship as it has developed (Hayden 1981). A parallel concentration of research and critique has been on the place of housework as unpaid labour, in which private domain the relatively isolated housewife is reduced to a series of vicarious pursuits. These ensure her removal from any of the more important political and public domains, and construct an elaborate sub-culture of women’s domestic affairs fostered by media such as women’s magazines which reproduce this ideological form of patriarchy (e.g. Barrett & McIntosh 1982; Coward 1984; Davidoff 1978).

A possible alternative perspective may be related to certain trends emergent from recent studies by sociologists and economists. It may be argued that the domestic sphere originated as the shrine of ‘spirituality’ which determined the removal of females from the public domain (Zaretsky 1976). With a decline in the importance of the workplace, however, has come an increasing orientation towards the home and the private sphere as the source for future affective relations. The household has also reemerged as a key arena for the pooling of resources, as in Pahl’s research (1984) on the articulation between different forms of labour. Somewhat neglected is the consumption-equivalent within which the male may be re-constructed within a new role which provides for a complementary gender relationship. There is evidence for this from Gershuny’s work (1978; 1983; 1985) on the do-it-yourself ethos based on replacing service industries by work within the home.

In the one comparable study available, based on a sample of fifty-four both owner-occupied and council tenants in Guildford (which did not, however, examine the actual decorative order) Johnston (1980) proposed three major groupings in gender relations. On the one hand there were those women who followed traditional role models, and were concerned to keep the various rooms in the house as functionally specific and resented men in the kitchen. At the other end were households where the room divisions had broken down as had the gender specificity of many household tasks, and the home was essentially regarded as a largely de-segregated family domain. The third group consisted of those women who under the influence of feminism looked towards the latter model but were constrained to practise according to the traditional model and it was here that dissatisfaction was pronounced. It should be noted, however, that the largest group in Johnston’s survey was owner-occupied, which is also where feminist ideas were in evidence.

A further major contextual factor is the considerable impact of the advertising output of the fitted kitchen industry. Many tenants are readers of women’s magazines and know of companies such as Hygena. In seeing what council tenants do it is worth remembering the very large sums spent on fitted kitchens by owner-occupiers in an industry worth around 1.5 billion pounds. Most such commercial kitchens are based on essentially identical melamine-faced chipboard carcasses and functional differences are minor. The trade journal lists prices from around £300 to £4,000 based on kitchens all storing the same amount of objects, the only substantive difference being the styles and materials of the doors and name of the company. i.e. most private households may be willing to spend up to thousands of pounds purely on style with virtually no functional consequences. I analysed a sample of 100 such advertisements from the company
brochures from which it was evident that the major organising dimension was
the evocation of time (for details see Miller forthcoming). That is, there were
three dominant classes:
a) solid wood doors evoking an olde-worlde nostalgia style associated with
carved insets, leaded glass, items of copper and brass, preserves, dried plants,
old masters and pewter;
b) A laminate fronted modernist form associated with geometric designs,
bright colours, spotlights, non kitchen equipment, stainless steel, fruit and cut
flowers;
c) A mixture of laminate and wood associated with a mixing of nostalgic and
modern items and more often associated with practical functions such as
cooking.

Underlying the temporal symbolism were two modes of organisation. On
the one hand was heterogeneity and bricolage with for example china from a
number of different sets, such that the objects were not united as visual style
but implied memorabilia related to the householder’s own past. The opposite
organisational principle was one of homogeneity, in which all items related
stylistically to all others, and it was the visual cohesion which determined the
meaning and acceptability of particular forms. These advertisements are useful
because they have a clarity in developing the logic of certain organisational prin-
ciples which as we shall see is rarely equalled in ordinary people’s actual kitchens.

There are significant differences between the assumptions of advertising and
the experience of consumers. For example, in advertisements the young are
shown with modernist forms and the elderly with the nostalgia style. Histori-
cally however the earliest fitted kitchens in the 1950’s were universally modern-
ist, the mixed pine and laminate developed in the 1960’s and the nostalgia style
based on oak did not take off until the 1970’s. For the present generation,
therefore, it is modernism that is historical, nostalgia that is relatively new. In
interviewing on the estate it was the elderly who most often preferred the
modernist bright red and white forms out of a sample of advertisements
they were shown, while the young tended to go for the nostalgia styles,
although several of the elderly noted that they were supposed to like the
nostalgia forms and would probably have responded accordingly to a simple
verbal questionnaire. This is the first of a series of examples indicating the gulf
between what people felt they were supposed to like and what they actually
identified with.

A final contextual factor is the impact of differences in available resources. In
the commercial world it is generally assumed that ‘doing up’ your kitchen is the
work of owner-occupiers as part of a more general strategy of financial
investment, and council tenants would therefore have little reason to become
involved. Surprisingly Johnston found that council tenants were as likely to
have made significant alterations to their kitchens as those in the private sector
(1980: 120). This is despite the fact that council tenants would make no money
out of their kitchens, and indeed in the North London group most believed they
would have to remove all their alterations and return the kitchen to its original
state before they went, although in practice this was not actually the case.

One possible explanation for this finding might have been that council
kitchens were less adequate than those in owner-occupied housing and therefore required functional improvements. Johnston, whose background was in home economics, carefully investigated a number of standard food preparation and similar tasks: although the alterations made did increase satisfaction with the kitchen this was not associated with any actual improvement in the functional environment according to ergonomic criteria (1980: 133). Whatever the reasons behind such alterations they were therefore not reducible just to a search for efficiency.

Certainly material and social resources are variable, and this variation was evident in the north London study group, which included nine households of retired people, six whose adults were unemployed, four single women with children, but also two with four adults in employment. It would, however, be surprising if resources were a major determinant since in periods of over a decade, and using materials which were not costly, retired people were in practice as likely to have undertaken such changes as households of employed adults, with the exception of the installation of an expensive commercial kitchen.

An alternative would be to assume that the objective conditions of working class incomes constitute considerable constraints as compared to middle class life. The key question then would be about the characterisation of these constraints and what permits certain groups to emerge as creative appropriators of their environments, signifying an ability to transcend such oppressive conditions. Such a task is helped no more by romanticising the working class as an immanent society or deriding them as a mass. We need to learn from the differential success in this struggle; this means learning from people’s actions, which often project aspirations beyond the much more codified and perhaps deadening weight of language and legitimacy.

**Kitchens as canvases**

The estate I studied was roughly divided into three main populations, of Black (West Indian), Irish and local origin. As will become evident the main cleavage in terms of the materials used in this survey was between the local and Irish population as against the Black (and continental European) populations. Initially I will focus on the kitchens of the former. The following description is organised around normative clusters based primarily upon the degree to which the kitchens had been transformed. These are then associated first with household form and secondly with household attitudes to the kitchen based on interview data. These groups were therefore polythetic categories exemplified through particular cases and without invariant boundary definitions.

The first group consisted of three cases of single white males. These were conspicuous by marked conservation of the original kitchen features. An example was a retired male living in a bed-sitting room who had no family and few friends, or, as he put it, “you see I’m one of those people . . . I keep to myself”. He did not leave the flat except to shop or visit the library but in his bedsit he had only the kitchen and bedroom to dwell in. Despite living there thirteen years nothing had been done: there was the original black lino flooring
and the units as they had first been installed, with only a lightshade added; yet since retirement the proportion of time he spent alone in the kitchen would rival that of a prisoner in solitary confinement. Another individual appeared equally isolated socially. The third, who was much more inclined to bring friends around to drink, had a few decorations in the kitchen, mainly paintings of the Virgin Mary.

In contrast to these was the sole example of a nuclear family in which the male claimed to dominate household activities. Here the work done was of a classic do-it-yourself variety, resulting in considerable physical change but a complete heterogeneity of effect. There was a new lino flooring, and lino had also been cut into squares and put up as substitute ‘tiles’ over the cooker and by the sink. Additional work-surfaces had been constructed out of two quite dissimilar laminates, with numerous additions including a neon light. The overall result was somewhat chaotic.

The second group consisted of five households, four couples and one single mother. Although in no instances did they approach the complete conservatism of the first, the alterations made were fairly slight. All had net curtains and had made at least one change of surface, such as a new lino floor or a wallpapered or painted wall, but they retained the basic order of the original fitments. This degree of decorative work was closely associated with a set of interviews which came closest to the image of the isolated and depressed woman identified in a number of studies of housewifery and the image of this particular ‘valium’ estate. They expressed fears about whether they would sound ‘common’, complained about ‘coloureds’ or squatters, talked about the unfriendly atmosphere on the estate, or made statements such as ‘there is a tenants’ association where you can have a moan but nothing is ever done about it’. They varied from the single mother where the weight of chores appeared overwhelming, to households with several waged workers whose problems seemed to relate more to the unappreciated status of housewifery.

The cluster may be widened by the addition of parallel cases such as that of an immigrant from Spain who expressed strongly the feeling that ‘such places’ were only for the poor, and showed considerable disassociation from her surroundings. One of the most nervous and depressive interviewees was associated with one of the most radically transformed kitchens. It emerged, however, that these strongly coloured and largely integrated decorations had been carried out by her sister from whom she had inherited the flat. Although she referred disparagingly to the ‘ghastly’ orange, in the eight years of her occupation she had never been able to change these inherited decorations.

Such households represented the minority in my survey, although the sample was very likely biased towards the sociable by those who refused to be interviewed. The largest cluster comprised kitchens where substantial changes had been made to the decorative order. Although the cupboards were wood and required periodic repainting, these kitchens retained the original plain white surfaces. Instead a large number of additional objects had been brought in and used, as it were, to cover the cupboards up. Objects such as teatowels, breadboards, teacosies and trays were very common and often associated with a particular aesthetic of large bold flowers, cats, dogs and bright patterns. As well
as being placed on surfaces, breadboards and trays were typically placed vertically against the walls with their face forward to emphasise their decorative nature. Post-cards, souvenirs, cuttings from magazines and pictorial calendars might all be hung or stuck on the walls. Sometimes this was used in matching sets, but there was also the ‘biographical’ pattern in which no attempt was made to find order at the level of design, rather each piece appeared to be a memento of family or holidays, as in the commercial nostalgia style in which the relation between objects was maintained in the memories of the occupants but not expressed visually.

The heterogeneity of effect within any individual household was, however, contrasted with the extent to which similar such objects were found throughout the group. Indeed these objects and their decorative designs are quite familiar as a prevalent working-class aesthetic in Britain and are available in many of the large chain stores. They are distinguished by their decorative forms which are large, taking up most of the available surface of the object, with bright bold colouring drawing the attention. As such they are often regarded by the arbiters of taste as ‘vulgar’ as against the more subtle but expensive decorations which are intended merely to enhance or ‘frame’ the object of attention (Gombrich 1979).

It may well be that this particular form of popular taste, found on the estate, was in part accounted for by the requirement for a set of consumer objects, often given as gifts, which could then be employed to personalise properties which did not belong to the occupants. This tenants’ aesthetic was used to cover over and draw attention away from what the occupants clearly saw as the intrusive signifiers of their housing status. The cupboards were, of course, utilised but here remained alien, to be submerged in a welter of bricolage. This strategy, which might be complementary to others (for example in other rooms within the flats), was also especially associated with single (including widowed) women, involving as it did no physical alteration to the kitchen but merely an organisation of consumer goods.

In complete contrast to this strategy a few women appeared to have developed a very powerful relationship with the kitchen evident in their decorative order and associated with informants’ identification with traditional networks through which they became what one of the informants referred to as ‘kitchen-birds’. Here the cupboards had been covered with a strong coloured laminate or paint and all decorations such as curtains, wallpaper and floor coverings had been carefully chosen to create an effect of complete homogeneity within which all items in the visual field co-ordinated as a colour scheme. For kitchen-birds, the kitchen was a focal domain for female, but not male, visitors. The aesthetic emphasis on the kitchen as itself the context for tea-drinking exchange visits was comparable to Gullestad’s (1984) study in Bergen, Norway of a far more developed ‘kitchen-table’ society based on very powerful female networks. Interview evidence suggested that on this estate, as in virtually every study of British working-class networks, the dominant relationships were with family, for example visiting sisters and mothers, with friendship usually taking second place.

The final two groups consisted of only two cases each. Two kitchens had been
transformed to the extent that they were virtually replacement fitted kitchens. In one the fitted units were largely retained but the doors replaced with wooden doors, and the wall covered with wood panelling. There were a variety of other wooden objects such as bread bins placed on the worksurface. The effect was not entirely homogeneous, as some of the woods varied and the doors were the wrong size for the cupboards and had had to be put sideways on. All such doors were carved in what the commercial sector terms ‘cathedral arch’ style. The other case employed similar doors of different woods but with an astonishing backdrop. The occupant had taken some old wood, stained it black, and arranged it in a series of four fake ‘oak’ beams going across the ceiling and down the walls. Furthermore on one side had been constructed a fake chimney breast which led down to what had been made to look like a ‘medieval’ open fireplace ‘converted’ into a space for storing saucepans and suchlike. The floor covering was a mottled ‘old stone’ effect lino.

Finally came two instances of replacement fitted kitchens bought commercially. The first, estimated to cost around £2,000, was carried out during the period of study. On the first visit, the kitchen had been closer to the bricolage cover-up aesthetic, with some matching elements. The new fitted kitchen was white with ‘classic’ internal rectangular beading and a white worktop. This was set against the blue-grey found in the new flooring and curtains and picked up by a variety of objects such as a set of three cylindrical containers, a cassette radio and a grey tray with an internal white rectangle and some blue and white china pieces. Virtually nothing remained from the previous kitchen, even the array of houseplants was replaced by one in a dominant grey ceramic plant pot. The entirety was highlighted by a series of ceiling spotlights.

The overall look, evoking the pictures in advertising brochures, was also found in the other purchased kitchen, which looked to have been still more expensive, though no cost was given. The degree of order and style was comparable, although this kitchen had been built four years previously. It incorporated a split level oven and extractor fan, neon strip lighting, a wallpaper of fake ‘terracotta’ tiles and a floor of ‘fake’ stone. Apart from a double spice rack, some matching china and a utensil rack there was a marked lack of additional objects.

The particular nature of the dominant patterns revealed by this sequence was further clarified through its contrast with another population which had reacted in a very different fashion to the same circumstances. There was no a priori reason to expect that ethnicity would represent a major line of cleavage and, partly under the influence of a study of household objects in Chicago (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981) and Wallman’s work in Battersea (1982; 1984), I was anticipating that it would be at most a secondary issue. This was not the case, however.

There were several cases which could best be understood in terms of specific ethnicity: for example, the single South Asian household with its arrays of trays of vegetables comparable to the context from which it had recently arrived, or the Spanish family working for their embassy with its very large wine rack and extensive collection of ceramics, wine pourers and other souvenirs. The major contrast, however, lay between the tendency just described (either to cover up
or to replace fitments), and the typical pattern amongst black householders: to construct strong visual patterns based on painting the units and using the same or contrastive colours for floors, walls and ornaments. Brown, orange and purple were the dominant colours, while when the white tenants did paint units they were more likely to use blue and green. There also tended to be a different use of ornament, which was less central to the design organisation. One example consisted of fitted units painted light brown. All woodwork within the kitchen had been painted the same colour and this was complemented by the painting of the ceiling, fake brown ‘tiles’ on the floor and in the wallpaper, a set of wooden chairs and a smoked glass light shade. More common was the use of brighter orange and purple in contrastive modes, as in diagonal effects within tiling. Not only black tenants employed this decorative order. A Cypriot case was conspicuous by the lack of object bricolage and homogeneity of its matching brown colour scheme.

This strategy was dominant amongst the black population but was by no means a rule. There was an overlap between the different populations, especially amongst the young, and many kitchens had elements from different strategies, such as a ‘biographical’ cover-up strategy which still employed a few matching items. At their most extreme the dominant decorative strategies of the two main populations constituted an inversion. One was centred on the structural elements to which additional objects were subservient, the other made the structural fitments entirely subservient to the object bricolage. The ‘kitchen-bird’ form, however, carried this inversion within the white population.

Another difference was the use made by some black households of the back of the kitchen. At its most extreme this area was covered from floor to ceiling by a massive pile of disparate objects such as broken sewing machines and pieces of furniture. In the two cases of a three-generation female household, one exhibited this disorder to such an extreme as to suggest an inability to cope, but the other in very similar circumstances showed no such tendency. One of the other cases commented on the situation in the form of a china spoon hung on one wall on which was inscribed ‘I like my kitchen to be clean enough to be healthy and untidy enough to be happy’.

**Analysis: the social determinants of decorative strategies**

Although both interview and visual data have been provided in the above survey there was one substantial discrepancy between them. While discussions of changes carried out or intended emphasised functional considerations such as the problems of cooking, of smells or of serving food, these did not emerge as a major factor in the actual changes made. Boudon noted an identical distinction in his study of householders in Le Corbusier’s village of Pessac. He suggests that while the functional logic of any particular householder was clear, taken as a group the degree of contradiction suggested that the actual key factors lay elsewhere (1972: 83). In the London group one householder’s ample space was, for another, ‘totally inadequate’ (with no evident correlation with numbers of children and similar factors) and feelings about where individual items should be placed varied considerably. This echoes Johnston’s (1980) more systematic
survey of the disparities between ergonomic functions, language and observable changes.

This may in part account for differences in these findings and those of Bourdieu (1984). His construction of the major dimensions by which taste is organised in France is largely based on verbal responses to questionnaires. His conclusions regarding working-class taste is summarised as 'Necessity imposes a taste for necessity which implies a form of adaption and consequent acceptance of the necessary' (1984: 372). This looks very strange when set against the traditional British parlour (Roberts 1973) devoted to unused space and its decorations which Bourdieu reduced to mere effect (1984: 379–80). Still today, when parlours are effectively forbidden by the architectural profession, the two-thirds of tenants who mentioned this subject kept a special area in the main room for their best, brought out at Christmas if at all.

Although they could be only roughly determined, financial resources did not emerge as a significant factor except in the two cases of a purchased kitchen, and even there in one case it was the resources of children living outside the estate which was crucial. By contrast, as evident from both verbal and visual evidence, the fact of being a tenant did considerably affect the lives of many of these people (this might well be less true on a terraced street where one’s housing status was not so immediately evident). Most revealing were the disjunctions in what people said. For example, several informants claimed that what they really wanted was a ‘fitted kitchen’. This suggested that although they already had a fitted array of floor and wall units, as in advertisements for fitted kitchens, for them a ‘real’ fitted kitchen was one purchased, not allocated. Certain tenants when asked to select preferred styles from examples, noted that they would have chosen the nostalgia mode but for the fact that they were in a council estate —that is, the ideals they associated themselves with were rendered pretentious by their circumstances. There was also a claimed lack of knowledge about the 1980 Housing Act which substantially improved tenants’ rights of alteration and independence in their use of their properties. Tenants mostly held that whatever was done would have to be put back to its original state before leaving the property, although in practice this had hardly ever happened. In general there was a marked antipathy to the council which was seen as failing to be present when needed (for repairs for example), but at the same time an alien presence around them.

The examples of replacement, or near-replacement, kitchens were interesting here. The images portrayed in the commercial brochures associated such kitchens and their carved or beaded doors with ‘middle-class’ life-styles. It may be no coincidence that the two households with replacement kitchens were amongst the few who provided unsolicited and quite vehement statements about being ‘ordinary working-class folk’, which in every other respect, such as present or previous occupation, was clearly the case. Negative feelings about the council were expressed in other statements such as ‘they stick in a cupboard here and a cupboard there and say that’s alright, they’re only common people, they won’t know the difference’.

On the whole then there was considerable evidence to suggest that the white population felt a deep unease about their household consumption status as
tenants, reflected in resentment and feelings of being stigmatised. Furthermore they clearly associated the fitments provided in the kitchen with the council, as objects embodying in their materiality the intrusive signification of their status. Three main strategies were evident in response to this situation of alienation. One was passive, in which alienation was interiorised as the futility of action and an inability to appropriate the material environment within which one lived. The second was an attempt to use aesthetic construction to impose a façade which as far as possible drew attention away from the fixtures and towards items directly chosen by or associated with the tenants. And finally, a critical point was reached where the alien forms were themselves expelled or thoroughly transformed and replaced with either purchased or built constructions by the tenants. In such a situation it seemed that in practice such commodities were viewed as having much greater potential for identification than items provided by the state.

This, however, must be set within the particular structure of social inequalities. That there was no intrinsic linkage between forms of distribution and the experience of alienation was evident from a contrast within the estate with the remaining third of the population. Interviews with black tenants confirmed the evidence of their decorative strategies. Although various other resentments were expressed, the actual fact of being tenants did not seem anything like as central to their identity. They were generally negative about this status but saw it more often as transitional to something else, and in that respect providing a valuable opportunity. They did not appear to have the feeling of alienation derived from an introjection of this condition as integral to their identity. As noted above, the connotations of housing consumption status in Britain differ markedly from, for example, continental Europe, and the black population, in constructing its identity as a group, might well on occasion have been interiorising their experience contrastively with their neighbours rather than empathetically.

The same contrasts suggest that the interview evidence should not be interpreted as direct evidence for any objective faults in the local council. The council here was a projection by the tenants in their construction of self-images as victims or combatants. The attitude to the council was often ambivalent, because at the same time all tenants saw themselves as working class and many would favourably compare their present situation with previous private rented accommodation or the alternative of bed and breakfast ‘slums’. For some people, such an ambivalence might be debilitating, since full appropriation appeared to be assisted by a relatively clear sense of overcoming. Sartre perhaps over-abstracted these tensions in his later work (1976) where he implies that true social relations only emerge in the union of terrorism against an oppressive order, but at this more mundane level an agonistic framework appeared to help.

The appropriation of the state, could not, however, be separated off from equally important contextual factors, of which the most significant was gender. In Johnston’s survey the idea and ideals of feminism and sexual equality had a marked effect on the feelings of association and disassociation households felt for their kitchens. In my own study, however, which did not include the owner-occupied sector, there was remarkably little evidence of such ideas and
values; the most commonly expressed feeling was that the kitchen was essentially a woman’s domain in which men helped in a few specific tasks but otherwise should stay out. The male’s own distaste for the kitchen was strongest amongst the Irish immigrants and weakest amongst West Indian immigrants. But if a decade of apparently popular feminism had permeated little into this area, the relatively unremarked transformation in male conceptions of their home role had had a quite pronounced effect.

The evidence suggests that unlike the high arts the aesthetic of the home is exclusively female centred (compare Parker & Pollock 1981). The increasing amount of time spent by males in the home has resulted in a new role, based on the link with physical labour as the site for the development of masculinity. But this new symbolic symbiosis operates through men having nothing to do with design. Without a female to direct them they are in most cases entirely impotent, but when given their direction they then perform their specifically assigned ‘do-it-yourself’ tasks. As Gershuny has demonstrated in his part of a study in Battersea the electric drill, electric saw and hand saw are the domestic items most exclusively male-associated (Wallman 1982: 165).

Males may show more initiative in expressing themselves in other rooms which are not so strongly female-associated, but the evidence of my survey was that among the white population, physical labour was subservient to design. The most extreme cases showed the impotence of single males to enact any changes. Women were more flexible, in that they would undertake physical labour when no male was available for such work. In the main, however, females transformed their environment using aesthetic rather than physically expressive media.

The small group of replacement or near-replacement kitchens were again instructive here. There was a strong kin and gender complementarity, with the females both directing and being seen as the recipients of this expenditure (i.e. it was done for them), and the males as physically undertaking the transformations. In two cases it was particularly clear that the couples were seen as coming together to overcome their status as tenants, and affirming the power of kinship and marriage in this struggle.

The situation could be described as the emergence of a neo-traditionalism. Despite the pressure of modernist philosophies of equality and feminism which promoted the diminution of sexual distinction, and the increasing presence of men in the home, the evidence suggests that men did not take on any greater share of household responsibilities. Rather the older use of the public-private division to express gender had been renegotiated as a formal symbolic complementarity between what was seen as the appropriate gendered spheres within the home. As in many anthropological studies gender is perhaps best seen not from the perspective of an essentialist division from which two a priori categories of male and female come to the world with specific interests, but rather as being constructed through the cultural development of relational forms.

Gender on the estate might not be a simple continuation of some ‘traditional’ family order (which may have tended to a simpler segregation e.g. Whitehead 1978), but an emergent construction which could evoke such traditions.
Women as housewives defined themselves in relation to households, but this category could remain unrealised unless the marital couple had a mechanism relevant to their contemporary conditions through which they constructed the household as an activity. The result was a denial of the integrity of the female housewife, and especially the single male, and a stress on the necessity of a complementary and dynamic relationship which was brought together in the practice of ‘labour’ in the transformation of an alienating environment into an appropriated form. In this case the kitchen, although occupied by only one sex, was an objectification of the gender relationship and the incompleteness of its constitutive elements in themselves. What this implies is that even under present conditions, gender may in certain circumstances be best understood as a genuine dialectic.

The black population clearly did not conform to these generalisations. The interviews and the transformations indicated that there was not the same gender split. Single black males showed a positive attitude to their kitchen and produced elaborate decorations and tiling (and discussions of cooking) without female guidance. The background to this may well be the strong gender autonomy observed in studies of West Indian societies, associated with a high incidence of female-headed households (e.g. Massiah 1983). A tradition which asserts the separate viability of households without a resident male is in a sense less debilitating for the male who has to construct a male centred domestic sphere, since each sex may define itself with a relative degree of autonomous control.

Within these gender relations a further expressive dichotomy has arisen in the distinction between modernistic ‘kitchen–bird’ homogenisation and the nostalgic bricolage of the cover-up aesthetic. Similar divisions have been shown in other studies to relate to the relative importance of kinship as against friendship and length of time spent in the area, with modernist style being used to build new communities, nostalgia to cement older ones (compare especially Pratt 1981). These differences should not be viewed as superficial or inauthentic. As Williams has shown, the parallel evocation of a country and city polarity in literature may be equally far from the actual historical construction of these domains under modern capitalism, but this does not prevent them from being powerful media for the representation of ideal worlds, marking or highlighting particular historical conjunctures (R. Williams 1973: 189–306).

Underlying relations of gender and tenancy is a more general argument about the linkage between work done on the kitchen and the nature of the social relations of consumption. One of the clearest generalisations to emerge from my study was the link between people who seemed lonely, depressed and isolated, and the lack of decorative development. By contrast, constructing an objectification of the household and its relationships through creative activity appeared a strong signifier of an active social involvement. Though this sociability was commonly based on kin outside the estate or intra-household, it was often the relationships of affection between, for example, husband–wife and parent–child which were expressed (by this I do not mean the relations of equality implied in the term symmetry (as in Young & Willmott 1973) since there was little evidence for these on the estate).
The replacement and near-replacement kitchens and their link with social involvement represented the extreme cases. One household was almost the only couple that effectively lived (or at least were continually to be seen) on the corridor outside their flat, and used the estate as though it was a classic East End neighbourhood (Young & Willmott 1957). Another as head and active participant in the newly reformed tenants' association was also amongst the most socially inclined. By contrast, the two clusters of entirely or largely unaltered kitchens were expressive of a very different condition. The isolation of one of the single males was described above. In the other cluster, although the housewives were mainly members of households, what was registered in their material world was precisely the isolation and lack of valuation which is often the experience of housewifery as a core of identity. The ideal objectified in the neo-traditionalist family may often remain unrealised. It demands a responsive attitude from the male, and this cluster conformed closely to the image of the housewife evoked by Oakley (1976) in her classic critique of this form of labour. The background to this was the evidence for high valium intake and constant bickering. The antipathy to neighbourliness as against the high regard for privacy which was evident from interviews was itself, however, hardly new. The close neighbourhoods of the Ealing film studios of the 1940's were by no means an accurate reflection of actual social interaction in working class districts as was made abundantly clear by the surveys made in the same period (Mass Observation 1943: 208). Apart from an antipathy to one's immediate neighbours, less than 1 in 100 expressed any interest in community involvement. The more important factor behind any deterioration in conditions for housewives as evident from various sociological studies is likely to be the relative absence of close kin.

This division in consumption relations such that in some households gender difference became the basis of an alienated isolation and in others was constitutive of cultural dynamics expressed in the activity of appropriation, finds an interesting parallel in the much more developed sociology of the division of labour. In Pahl's recent work (1984; Pahl & Wallace 1985) as in most of the articles in the book Beyond employment (Redclift & Mingione 1985), it is shown that informal labour and exchanges of labour are not an alternative to formal waged employment but rather an additional resource which may be exploited once a foundation of financial resources is secured. Transformation of kitchens in the estate in a sense represents the equivalent in the area of consumption. The appropriation of the home is not a substitutive or vicarious activity but a material objectification of certain social resources available in the construction of household identity which in turn provides a foundation for the formation of larger networks.

It is, however, difficult to determine social networks from the kind of verbal information I recovered. Gullestad (1984) noted in her Norwegian case that informants claimed to have little concern with what other people thought, but their actions were highly normative and gregarious. In the case of the present survey people indicated a great deal of such concern with what other people might say and yet may rarely have had experience of any actual evaluation. 'Neighbours' became a kind of collective super-ego in which normative order
was interiorised and expressed itself internally. Once this was established, there was little need for the assertion of actual external authority.

**Conclusion**

If the most widely used critical perspective on production is that which refuses to accept that work is other than a social activity (since commodities are the result of labour and not merely self-producing), then the same may be said of consumption, which is also sometimes mystified by being regarded as merely vicarious or passive. Despite the specific nature of the problems faced by council tenants (the focus of this article), the same overall problematic would be encountered in both private housing and under an equitable socialism. In all these cases householders must enter into creative strategies of consumption to appropriate that which they have not themselves created, even if they feel far more positive about the corporate body that built their home.

To see this, however, we have to regard apparently trivial activities as deriving from profound concerns. The failure of most current social theories to have regard to consumption activities such as home decoration has its roots in the more general denigration of consumption and other such ‘women’s work’. If housewifery is to be condemned for its lack of possibilities of self-actualisation (Oakley 1976: 222–33), it is not so much because of its objective nature (it is not a priori less susceptible than industrial work for appropriation through social labour), but because of our refusal at both ordinary and academic levels to regard it as other than trivial. The results of Gullestad’s (1984) study argue strongly against the common assumption that the material conditions of housework make it perforce an individualising and private form of work.

This argument is not intended to romanticise the strategies employed in mass activity. The evidence from this case study is for a complementarity closely linked to inequality. Potentially difference and hierarchy could be disaggregated, but it would be unreasonable to expect a clear model of ideal consumption, extricated from the conditions under which actual consumption strategies must be developed. Equally work done on kitchens may have quite different implications when performed in some other cultural context. It has been argued, however, that a general principle of significance for the contradictions intrinsic to industrial society may be recovered from the observation of some strategies underlying such activities. When recognised as a legitimate form of consumption they indicate that this may be an important social arena whose goal is the production of inalienable culture through dialectical, that is socially productive labour. This inalienability derives from an activity in which objects become integral aspects of processes which are constructive of social relations.

**Note**

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The fieldwork took place on an intermittent basis during 1986–7. Households were approached through knocking on doors and either interviewing immediately or establishing a more convenient time for a visit (or return visit). In most cases the main informant was specified as the person who had primary use of the kitchen, but as interviews were held informally in the sitting room other family members commonly took part. There are two likely sources of bias if this group is taken as representative of the estate as a whole. Firstly a bias against working households since more visits were held on weekday afternoons than in the evenings or at weekends, and secondly a bias corresponding to those instances where sounds of occupancy were detected but no response made to the doorbell, and which may be supposed to have corresponded to single elderly females (as it often did in those cases where an interview was refused).

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S'approprier l'état dans la cité de H.L.M.

Résumé

Ce mémoire s'occupe de la nature de la consommation dans une société industrielle. Il examine la manière par laquelle les locataires dans une cité de H.L.M. ont décoré et transformé leur cuisine. Les locataires témoignent des différences frappantes dans la capacité de s'approprier des facilités offertes par la mairie. Ceci est considéré en fonction du genre, de l'ethnique et d'autres éléments. Une telle perspective illustre la nature dialectique de la catégorie du genre sous certaines conditions. Cela met également en relief le potentiel dynamique de la consommation à long terme, comme une arène dans laquelle des groupes sociaux essaient de transformer des biens aliénables en culture inaliénable. Cependant, ils sont souvent incapables d'accomplir ce but.