

Kitchen—A ‘Feeling at Home’ Place. Or is it? A Phenomenological Look into Kitchen Centred, Feeling at Home Experience

Shailaja Nair¹ and P. Padmavathi²

¹College of Engineering Trivandrum

²JNAFA University, Hyderabad

E-mail: ¹shailajanair@cet.ac.in, ²padma_pervar@yahoo.co.in

Abstract—Women have always been the integral part of any home. Many of the positive aspects of home, like feeling at home, have been attributed to the presence and nurturing undertaken by women. The kitchen occupies a central role in the discharge of these duties in their roles as caretakers of the home and family. A phenomenological study was undertaken which aimed to understand the ambivalent experience of feeling at home of three women in relation to the kitchen spaces in their homes, and also understanding the role of architectural space enhancing or detracting from that experience. This was done through dialogical, semi structured interviews with the women, who were the primary caretakers of their homes, identified through purposive sampling. The study found that the feeling at home experience of the women was affected by many factors. While personal and social factors also played a role in their experiences, these are discussed in only in relation to the spatial aspects of the responses. The study concludes that sensitive design interventions in the kitchen spaces can enhance the experience of feeling at home for the entire family.

Keywords: *Feeling at Home, Kitchen design, Phenomenology*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is an outcome of a larger study on ‘feeling at home’ involving the whole home. The mixed responses of the women interviewed, to their kitchen spaces, though outside the immediate objectives of the main study, were striking enough to warrant a deeper look into them.

Feeling at home is an emotion that arises from “feeling at ease, familiar and included with a social structure” [1] (p 54). This emotion is most often associated with one’s own home, which is central to one’s existence, irrespective of its physical structure. Women who are primary caretakers of the family spend a significant portion of their time within their homes in the kitchen. This study seeks to understand women’s mixed views on the experience of ‘feeling at home’ in relation to the kitchen.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Case study design was selected as it permitted detailed investigation of the phenomenon under study, namely the ambivalent experience of ‘feeling at home’. The methodological approach is phenomenology. Phenomenology is a branch of philosophy which deals with the in-depth understanding any aspect of human experience. Edmund Husserl (1859 -1938), a German philosopher, initiated this branch of philosophy in rejection of positivist approach which relied purely on scientific methods to understand the nature of phenomena. According to Seamon [3], phenomenology is the interpretive study of human experience. All phenomena, which can be experienced by people, can be studied through the phenomenological lens. Several authors describe phenomenology as a philosophy, a range of conceptual and methodological approaches [2-4].

Phenomenology comes within the qualitative paradigm of research. This specific method was chosen because it involves the in-depth understanding of the phenomena under study, from the point of view of the person experiencing it. In this approach, there is no attempt to generalize within the findings. The methods employed for data collection were semi-structured, dialogical, in-depth interviews at the houses of the participants, observations during walk through probe of their kitchens and discussions about the observations with the participants.

Semi-structured interview was conducted as it allowed the participants to convey their experiences freely, with occasional forays being undertaken outside the study objectives also. An interview guide was prepared which provided a check that all the intended questions were covered, not necessarily in the order that they were listed. Observation of the kitchens and their location in the house and relation to other rooms was done. The interviews were conducted in their living rooms and later in their kitchens.

Observation along with the demonstration of activities within the kitchen, by the participants, helped to further understand their responses. Interviews were audio recorded and supported by photo documentation. Transcriptions of the interviews were done by the first author. Analysis of the data commenced during data collection itself. Themes were generated after isolating meaning units from the transcripts related to the study aims and condensing these. These are discussed below to bring out the uniqueness of each participant response and their commonalities.

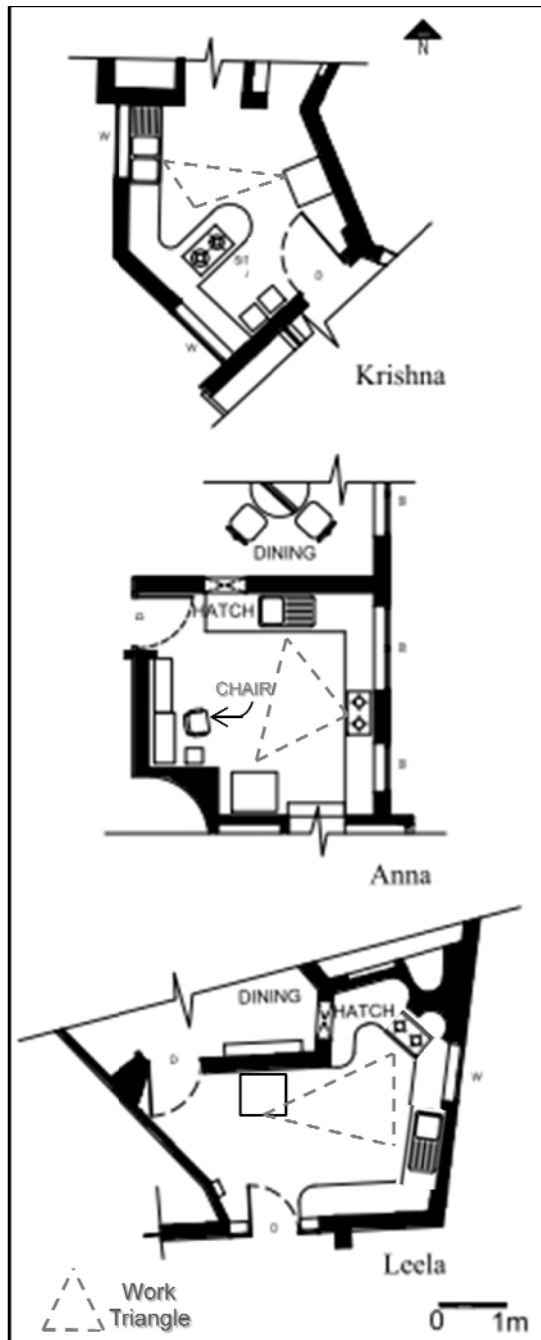


Fig. 1: Kitchen plans

3. PARTICIPANTS

3.1. Participant Selection

Phenomenological studies require that participants be selected primarily for their knowledge or interest in the experience being studied and their willingness and ability to take part in a phenomenological interview [5]. As phenomenological studies aim for depth over breadth, the number of participants is fewer compared to other research approaches. The three participants for the study were selected through purposive sampling based on their ambivalent responses to feeling at home in their kitchens.

3.2. Homogeneity

A relatively homogenous group of participants is recommended for phenomenological research. The participants were all members of nuclear families living for at least 20 years, in detached single family, architect designed residences in plotted residential areas, in the same city. The houses were approximately 200 m² in area. The participants share similar education and economic backgrounds, which can be characterized as upper middle class. All of them are solely responsible for cooking, afresh from basic ingredients, for their families. The kitchens were 9.5 to 11.5 m² in area, with all of them having additional work areas and storage spaces/areas. They are/were all working mothers of now adult children and hold/held jobs for a greater part of their adult lives.

3.3. Participant information

Participant 1 - Krishna aged 67 years, retired, mother of two, widowed, lives on her own except for extended visits to her adult children.

Participant 2 - Anna aged 62 years, retired, mother of three, married, lives with husband and youngest son who is a student.

Participant 3 - Leela aged 56 years, working at an educational institution, married, lives with husband, has two children who visit during work and study breaks

(All names are pseudonyms)

4. FINDINGS

Many sub themes were generated from the analysis of the interview transcripts and the sub themes categorised into themes. Features unique to the participants are discussed separately. Themes common to all the participants are discussed, with particular focus on spatially related themes.

4.1. Unique to participant

Some themes were excluded from the above as they were unique to the participants, yet had spatial implications. For example, Krishna for whom the kitchen was a place where

family and friends gathered. There was an area of 2 m² within the kitchen separated from the work triangle, where even guests would sit and chat with her. In contrast, Leela discouraged even her children, especially when young, from entering the kitchen. Very particular to Anna was using the kitchen as a place to relax and read the newspapers, or just sit between meal preparation and household chores. She also found it convenient to rest her feet while working there. Leela and Anna had adjusted to continuously standing while doing kitchen work, the former because she preferred to finish work quickly and leave, and the latter preferred resting at the dining table, for reasons explained further on.

4.2. Themes

The common themes found were:

- 1) Centrality of kitchen in daily life
- 2) Domestic work as gendered compulsion
- 3) Feeling at home as being able to connect with family
- 4) Feeling at home as being able to look outside

4.2.1. Themes 1 and 2. The first two themes fall outside the stated scope of the paper which focuses on the spatial aspects of the experience of feeling at home. Yet these shed light on the remaining themes. The central position that the kitchen space occupied in their daily lives was understood as all the participants referred to their kitchens and activities there at length. Their responses clearly indicated that a greater part of their waking hours, especially when they were working mothers of school going children, were in the kitchen. Related activities, like supervising the house help, running the washing machine, and similar household work were conducted from the kitchen or adjacent areas. Yet when specifically asked if they preferred to be there once their work was done, the answer was in the negative. (This ambiguous response is explained later). The second theme domestic work as a gendered compulsion is a social reality the world over. The remaining themes had overtly spatial relevance.

4.2.2. Feeling at home as being able to connect with family

All of the participants agreed that the kitchen was a place where they felt at home when they could connect with family members.

Krishna recalled earlier times when her husband would sit on his chair in the sitting area within the kitchen, previously referred to. She spoke of her children sitting on the slab, adjacent to a window, that was an extension of the kitchen work top. This sociopetal arrangement enabled her to face her family while cooking. They would just sit there and talk to her or help by cutting vegetables. They normally dined there together. She felt happy with people around her and characterised such times as feeling at home ones. However, she was clear that being alone in the kitchen instantly transformed it as a non feel at home space. It was then just a work space where she completed her work and left as soon as possible.

Both Anna and Leela had a hatch between the kitchen and dining rooms. They experienced feeling at home when they were able to communicate with or hear their family members while working in the kitchen through the hatch. They felt connected to the family and confirmed that working in the kitchen would be a very isolating experience but for the hatch. It was observed that the ventilation and the perceived space within the kitchen were also considerably improved due to provision of the hatch. In both families, when the children were younger, the mothers used to monitor the children, while eating and doing home work or would listen to the happenings at school and college, through the hatch.

3.2.2. Feeling at Home as being able to look outside. The participants all agreed that it was important for them to have a view to the outside.

In Krishna’s kitchen, it was important to her that she could see from the kitchen to the gate. This requirement was specifically asked of the architect. She insisted on this arrangement as she had experienced difficulties, in previous houses that she had stayed in, of having to go some distance from the kitchen to the front door when someone rang the bell. In her house, she was able to look through the window and see anyone at the gate.

While Anna said she did not feel at home in the kitchen for relaxing, she pointed out the chair where she sat and read the newspapers, normally an action undertaken in a place where one feels at home. This mixed response was understood when the kitchen was observed. It was seen that the kitchen was sufficiently large and organised enough to have a chair in a corner without being within the work triangle. More importantly, while sitting there, she could look through the two windows of the kitchen to the outside.

Leela stated several times during the interview how much she enjoyed the view through the kitchen window to the greenery outside. The window was on the east side of the house and it was observed that in the morning, the kitchen was well lit. She spoke of how she paused in her work occasionally to look out of the window and feel refreshed. Yet when she wanted a rest during work, she would move to the dining room chair nearest the kitchen, from where she could look out through the dining room window to the greenery outside. Observation of the kitchen provided spatial reasons for it being so. It was seen that if a chair was placed in the kitchen where it was not a hindrance to the kitchen activities, the angle of vision and position of the chair in relation to the kitchen window would not provide a view to the outside. In her case, the view to the outside could be experienced from the kitchen only when standing to a corner.

5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The primary role of creating a home-like atmosphere rests mostly on the woman’s shoulders, given the gendered division of labour within a home [6] and this is reflected in the two

themes, centrality of kitchen in their daily lives and domestic work as a gendered compulsion.

Among the six key signifiers proposed by Somerville (1992) [7] of the meaning of home, two of them heart and hearth can easily be related to the traditional role of women as caretakers of the home and family. The former is the sense of emotional security and the feeling of love and happiness and the latter, physiological feeling of warmth and a homely atmosphere (Burris, 2014) [7]. Hearth with its literal meaning as fireplace has associations with kitchen, food and home. Thus these two coalesce spatially through the setting of kitchen and the extended presence of women in them providing food and emotional security to other members of the family. The centrality of the kitchen in their lives is evident and accepted by the participants. Though they feel at home with themselves in the role of provider of emotional comfort, they have varying reactions to their role as providers of food. Hence, the theme of domestic work as a gendered compulsion is justified. Sixsmith's study [8] reflects this as she finds that women experience security and sense of belonging within their home while simultaneously expressing dissatisfaction with their domestic role.

The overarching spatial theme 'Being beyond the kitchen' emerged from the two themes, connecting with family and looking outside. The participants while accepting their gendered roles within the home clearly felt at home within these compulsions when they were able to be connected with places outside the kitchen. Interaction with their family members was important aspect of feeling at home in their kitchens. Given the time spent within the kitchen, the hatch in two cases, and the seating space in one, greatly decreased the time they would otherwise be isolated in the kitchens. All of them mentioned that their kitchens were well ventilated and lit, making them feel at home within the circumstances. Krishna and Anna do not explicitly state a view towards the outside as a feel at home factor. Yet in Krishna's appreciation of being able to look outside even while cooking there and in Anna's action of spending time in her kitchen chair reading, even if between chores, clearly indicate windows in addition to providing light and ventilation, in providing a view from the kitchen to the greenery outside, give a feeling of being beyond the walls of the kitchen.

6. SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

While only limited aspects have been highlighted in this paper, there are important lessons that architects can learn. Kitchen design is not only about ergonomics, efficient work triangles and a work space which accommodates the kitchen gadgets. While not going into the merits or demerits of the social compulsions behind it, the kitchen occupies a place of psychological centrality within a home especially one in which the mother is the primarily responsible for cooking. Thus it is important that the kitchen be designed to maximise the possibility of interaction with the family members. Seating

space, however small, may be incorporated within or adjacent to kitchen, within sight and hearing. This may translate from closable hatches between the kitchen and dining/living areas to completely open kitchens, depending on the personal and cultural preferences of the family. The kitchen needs to be a well ventilated and lit. Windows provide light, ventilation and importantly, views to the outside also. It should be possible to look outside while working standing up, and resting also. Undesirable views need to be tackled through design of the window while retaining the elements necessary for physiological and psychological comfort. Provision for sitting is a must to rest one's feet in between work, given the extended time spent there. Care should be taken that these spaces do not intrude into the kitchen's work triangle. These spatial considerations will considerably aid physical comfort and alleviate the feeling of being isolated within the kitchen. These are for most part unrecognised by the people and rarely stated explicitly as design requirements. It is imperative that design professionals pay heed to and incorporate these finer, intangible and mostly unstated requirements. The study illustrates the great potential that these interventions have to affect the emotional health of the whole family.

The role of dialogical phenomenological interview as a means to understand the lived experiences of the participants is clearly evident from this study in its ability to bring out minute, overlooked aspects of daily life of which the participants themselves are often unaware. This approach, combined with direct observation and discussion of the observations with the participants, contributed to a richer understanding than would have been possible with each of these methods individually.

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