My Hearth Will Go On*
Sam Ghantous

Staring at the Zoom face-matrix for your meal with childhood friends; chewing along to a three-year-old Mukbang of «Jane ASMR»; fumbling through Google Home's annunciation of an anonymously uploaded Mille Feuille recipe; frantically screaming at the GE Oven to stop burning your pie...

Supplied by the sheer power of a singular fire source, the hearth functioned for our prehistoric counterparts as a collectivizing center for sharing and processing food. Today, that pursuit of shared experiences around eating has all but been distributed. A wealth of devices and content managed by signals, software, platforms, and interfaces exemplify a wider-spread transformation: that intimacy and control in the home, once the responsibility of the solid stuff of walls and floors, abides by changing routines of immediacy and presence. Despite this new paradigm of distance, architecture has yet to contend with distributed forms of communing.

I   AMIDST THE WI-FI FLAME

Such new routines reveal that we need not be together to prepare and share food at the same time, we may not even need to be there to begin with. Direct access to the fire of the hearth, by comparison, meant that families could simultaneously see and exchange across flames, directly poking at embers and picking at food; a collectivizing and immediate social form. (1) Fire has since been distributed into «gizmos» managed by systems that transmit a steady ocean of communication signals across long distances. In concert with means of capture and display like cameras and monitors, they control far more than just fire and manage to collect and consolidate remote presences and asynchronous timelines, gathering far-flung parties or buffering messages that will arrive in the future. Facilitating rituals of eating and integrating technical systems of cooking results in a relaxed attitude about what it means to be in the same place at the same time.

By way of example, the GE Kitchen Hub and Profile Range & Oven epitomize remoteness. Looking conspicuously like a microwave, the GE Kitchen Hub is a hollow box mounted above the stovetop to act as a ventilator for the likes of a GE Profile Range, below. (2) Its main attraction is the tap-touch screen and browser that replaces the view portal on an actual microwave, and two cameras displaying the range's activity below or in front, as you video chat with kin.

The GE Profile Oven mounts a heat-resistant camera to its interior to broadcast your crisping chicken to your phone while you garden. Dimensionally masquerading as a conventional microwave and oven suggests that our cooking spaces need not change to account for new techno-social paradigms. Meanwhile, cameras, a screen, and an internet connection indicate that watching recipe videos, catching up after a long day with a loved one, or sharing the delicious delights of hard work might not require that your counterpart for an evening be on the same continent. Compressed packets of video information spray your dinner plate across the globe to be consumed as media; dinner is long-distance.

Accordingly, Kitchen Hub's interface renders distance visible and manageable. Around the historic hearth, distance to fire defined activities: cooking in its immediacy and sleeping at the periphery of its radiating heat. Today, backlit monitors trade spatial centrality for centralized management of domestic tasks. On the one hand, the screen is a delimited edge for display and interaction, and on the other, a portal to distant spaces that it can affect. (3) Historically, interfaces like the dials of the Gas Range or the electrified Toaster embedded mediating mechanisms like valves and timers to automate the intuitions and skills that once managed fire by hand. Similarly, fiddling with Kitchen Hub's dashboard, one remotely conducts the domestic opera of cooking, securitization, and environmental control by setting timers and reviewing graphs that regulate your thermal comfort. The interface is a pixelated threshold to omnipresence. These effects sprawl outwards on a Wi-Fi surf that floods the house, received by domestic «doodads» that listen and obey. If the ancient hearth organized domestic environments from a central spatial position, software manages environments from centralized commands that invisibly radiate outwards.

Conversely, social media practices consolidate disparate schedules and abundant guests. Content on these platforms is uploaded to be ogled at on a whim, like pandemic-era TikTok videos that encourage eating-along, offering solidarity to isolated followers. (4) Live

A   Spaces of processing food with heat, historically: The hearth at the Shubayka Camp (upper left), the fireplace at Elcho Castle (upper right), the Cast Iron Stove in Catherine Beacher's House (middle left), the Gas Range in the Frankfurt Kitchen (bottom middle), and the Toaster in the Nakagin Capsule Tower (bottom right). Image: by the author

B The GE Kitchen Hub and GE Profile Range & Oven (center), in concert, suggest that remoteness and asynchronicity can manage the social and labor requirements of cooking and eating, translating activities into mediated experiences and entertainment, despite the possibility of being alone at home. Image: by the author

streaming a gluttonous meal on Twitch welcomes vicarious spectators to interact through emojis, comments, and requests; a dinner party with millions of guests. YouTube cooking videos demonstrate a viral food craze or simply offer the comfort of a familiar voice, watching a mother cook food that is not for you. These unidirectional gatherings mean that creators and participatory audiences have a range of presence and agency in social exchanges, whether it is the ability to reveal their faces as they eat or command the dinner conversation. Furthermore, «meeting up» could look more like attending an event that has already passed; a successfully asynchronous brunch. Cooking and dining with a smartphone-mate is a mobile experience that erases the solidity of the dining room, but transforms anywhere into an ambiguous zone of reception for your date (that probably took place sometime three years ago). Dinner is on-demand.

II EXTINGUISHING FIRE

The slowly extinguishing fire, both literal and figurative, that once drew people together, is quickly welcoming the heat of software and signals as sparks for communing. By no means exclusive to cooking and eating, this is symptomatic of a broader change: a dissolving sense of immediacy and conviviality. Conspicuously, in the case of the kitchen, architecture has not changed significantly in its form and organization with this paradigm but has welcomed appliances and platforms that reorganize what it means to gather around cooking and eating. These emerging forms of spatiality take place across global distances, consolidate events that might have happened at some point in the past, and welcome a range of presences. Can architecture propose the messy in-between spaces and rituals of being together and being at a distance?

Taking spaces of cooking and eating as an example, hypotheses might look like: a hybrid dinner party where appliances operate in-the-round as both cooking tools and portals to mediated guests; an air exhaust network that automates and broadcasts kitchen aromas to bedrooms, beckoning helpers and diners; or a collectivized dining hall to consolidate dishes prepared by appliances owned by individual tenants. As software and communication technologies claim to do the brunt of separating and connecting that architecture once did, we ought to organize togetherness to welcome a range of distances, timescales, and presences.

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