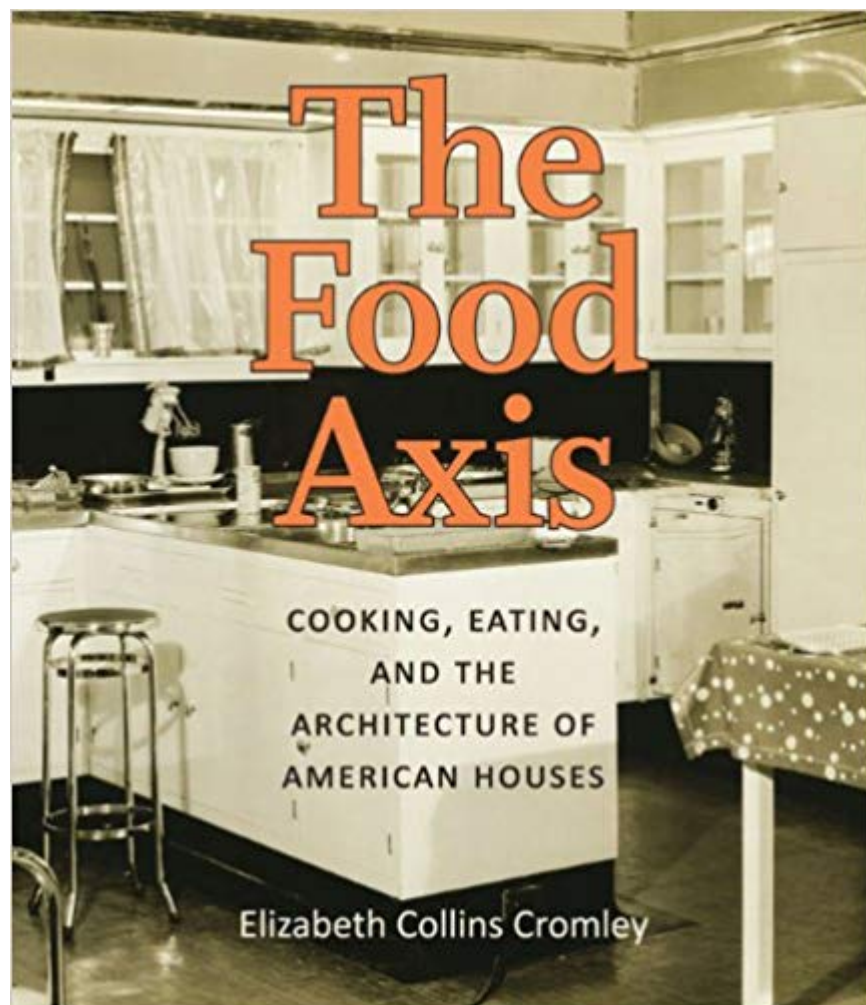
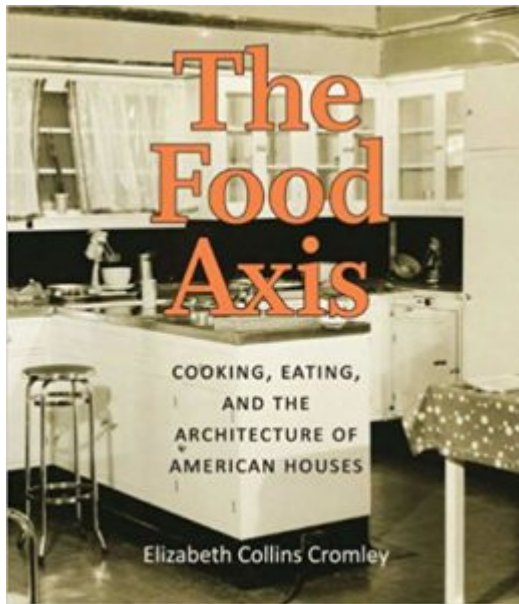


## Of Food and Space



This book has many virtues. A chronological look at the architectural implications of food preparation and consumption in America from the seventeenth century to the present, it draws on an extensive secondary literature to tell the history of what the author calls the “food axis” in America. This term embraces the spaces beyond the household kitchen—including dining rooms, patios, orchards, summer kitchens, milkhouses and smoke houses—that were used in provisioning the household. Understanding the kitchen as but one part of a larger, spatial food system is an important aspect of the book’s ambition and achievement. It is a building-type study with a difference.

The author intends to remediate the “conventional history of residential architecture” with its emphasis on grand structures and moments of origin by focusing on one aspect of the plan and by interjecting greater attention to issues such as gender, class, and linguistic terminology, and by using information on more modest structures and “downstream” histories of adapted



structures.

The secondary literature the author favors is that written by the members of the Vernacular Architectural Forum, a respected sub-group of architectural historians who focus on the built environment in North America and who are particularly enthusiastic about hands-on diligent study of extant pre-modern structures. Cromley's book draws together aspects of the fieldwork and archival research of these scholars to create a narrative about the architectural facets of food use over the past four centuries in parts of what is now the United States, an important and useful project.

Written in straightforward prose, *The Food Axis* is neither jargoned nor poetic. It reads very much like a collection of lectures to undergraduates, and I anticipate that that will be the book's primary audience. It is, above all, descriptive. One thing happens after another; the evidence proffered takes the form of small vignettes of individual houses at the particularized level of the plan.

The author intends to remediate the "conventional history of residential architecture" with its emphasis on grand structures and moments of origin by focusing on one aspect of the plan and by interjecting greater attention to issues such as gender, class, and linguistic terminology, and by using information on more modest structures and "downstream" histories of adapted structures (5). The "conventional history" of domestic space invoked here is a rather artificial straw man, or perhaps a remembered one of the generation of our grandfathers. Certainly it is difficult to think of a recently published target for her critique and correction. That being said, it is also true that no recent work specifically addresses the spaces associated with food, and in this, *The Food Axis* is original in concept and execution.

*The Food Axis* describes multiple homes drawn from studies of mostly East Coast structures. The thesis that threads through the book is straightforward: in the seventeenth century, food production, preparation, and consumption was informal, taking place in multi-function spaces; in the eighteenth century,

more specialization occurs, with the advent of "refinement" or "gentility" (92); in the nineteenth century, more formality occurs; in the early twentieth century, efficiency occurs; and in the late twentieth century, salutary informality reemerges. There is nothing surprising about this overarching argument. The author presumes that function is the key element in the food axis, that form (as in the plan) is its most visible expression, and that foodways express social relations and technological developments in a direct manner. Similarly the motives for human action are straightforward (for instance, "to impress guests" [42]). Because of these presumptions about function and motivation, we particularly miss the kinds of multi-dimensional thinking that occur in the paradigm-breaking article by folklorist Robert St. George, "To Set Thine House in Order," from the exhibition catalogue, *New England Begins*, and in the work of anthropologists who attend to food, especially Mary Douglas. For these scholars, foodways and food spaces express complicated and interesting cultural presumptions about important non-food issues. Similarly, *The Food Axis* does not give us the rich material-based social history we find concerning the history of textiles in America in historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *Age of Homespun*, for instance, a perspective that would pique the interest of historians in this dimension of material culture. For undergraduates in architectural history, however, the overall message of change from informal (simple) to formal (complex) to informal (simple with the help of complex technology) is probably a useful armature. Many scholars reading for themselves, however, will hope for something more. As one might expect from such an overall argument, the conclusions of each chapter and of the book as a whole are very terse.

In a few instances, smart broad statements draw us out of the microcosm-sequence of the developmental argument. For instance, the author remarks, "The smaller the house, the larger percent of interior space an interior kitchen occupied" (54). This point is not pursued here but it may prompt others to test and expand on this provocative observation in terms of various social classes in various eras.

The sixth chapter, which brings the study up to the present, seems much more informal than its predecessors. Drawn in a rather ad hoc way from popular culture sources, this chapter is much less fieldwork- and archive-based than the earlier chapters that consolidate studies of other architectural historians. This is not to say this chapter is less authoritative, just that it is based more on the prescriptive-descriptive world of journalism than the others. It therefore seems to present the middle class (and middle class aspirations) as normative.

Overall, this is a solid book, one that tells a narrative not easily found elsewhere. *The Food Axis* is both an innovative departure in the field of architectural history and a timely offering in the growing academic field of food studies.