

Infection and Corruption: Cooks and Kitchens in Eighteenth-Century Paris

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In one of the many articles he wrote for the *Encyclopédie*, the architect Charles-Antoine Jombert suggested that good residential design allowed dwellers to enjoy "the comforts of life, which naturally bring [them] to cherish what is good for [them], and to avoid all which can harm [them]."¹ But what exactly was good for residents, and what could harm them? As it turns out, these two categories, the "good" and the "harmful," aligned nearly perfectly with new boundaries between master and servant spaces, which during the eighteenth century underwent a dramatic process of differentiation and specialization. Claude Mignot has suggested that there emerged during this period "a new conception of the social space of the *hôtel*."² According to Norbert Elias, rooms for servants were "carefully segregated from the living and reception

¹ Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond D'Alembert, eds., *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une Société de Gens de lettres* (Paris: Briasson, 1751-1772), s.v. "Distribution."

² Claude Mignot, "De la cuisine à la salle à manger, ou de quelques détours de l'art de la distribution," *XVIIe siècle* 162 (1989): 33.

rooms.³ Reed Benhamou has characterized these newly separated servant and master zones as "parallel worlds."⁴

Yet if scholars agree that masters and servants increasingly inhabited separate spaces, considerably greater doubt surrounds the origins of this phenomenon. Jean-Louis Flandrin has cautioned, "It is still not known exactly how and why this need for privacy developed."⁵ Some historians point to the emergence of the belief that servants themselves constituted a nuisance. Claude Mignot faults the "imposing promiscuity" of servants for driving the kitchen ever farther from the masters' living space.⁶ Michel Gallet suggests the emergence of "an aristocracy haunted by its concern to escape the critical eyes of its servants, the taste for comfort with a liking for seclusion and privacy."⁷

Other scholars have proposed that a new sense of family intimacy drove architectural changes. Fernand Braudel refers, for example, to "the new requirements of comfort and intimacy" that helped to shape residential space.⁸ Elias proposes that over the course of the eighteenth century the private spaces of eating and sleeping became

³ Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 47.

⁴ Reed Benhamou, "Parallel Walls, Parallel Worlds: The Places of Masters and Servants in the *Maisons de plaisance* of Jacques-François Blondel," *The Journal of Design History* 7:1 (1994): 1-11.

⁵ Jean-Louis Flandrin, *Families in Former Times: Kinship, Household and Sexuality in Early Modern France*, trans. Richard Southern (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 94.

⁶ Mignot, 33.

⁷ Michel Gallet, *Paris Domestic Architecture of the 18th Century*, trans. James C. Palmes (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1972), 114.

⁸ Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century*, 3 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 1:308.

inextricably tied to the "family circle."¹⁰ Yet where Elias viewed family intimacy as almost antithetical to elite living, Flandrin has argued in contrast that "our sentiments involving the family" first emerged in the most elite households.¹¹ My fellow panelist Nina Lewallen has convincingly suggested that as early as the 1720s, Parisians began to conceive of the residential space of at least some *hôtels* in distinctly "domestic" terms patterned on family intimacy.¹²

Both explanations – growing unease about the presence of servants and the novel desire for family intimacy – are decidedly forward-looking. Both seek to find in the eighteenth century the origins of today's understanding of domestic service as effectively alien and of family intimacy as effectively normal. I argue, however, that we can best understand the eighteenth-century's "new conception of social space" by restoring the phenomenon to its original context: the sense that servants and their spaces posed the overwhelming threat of corruption. The *hôtel*'s servant areas assaulted the eyes, ears, and noses of those who lived in their vicinity and jeopardized bodily and material happiness. This imagined threat to the senses focused especially on the kitchen. Here the eighteenth-century understanding of residential space was precisely the opposite of today's: kitchens were hidden and disgusting, not open and inviting. Servants themselves were regarded

¹⁰ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 142.

¹¹ Elias, *The Court Society*, 51; Flandrin, 95.

¹² Nina Lewallen, "The Eighteenth-century Town House as Domestic Space: Mother and Child in the Hôtel de Matignon," (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Western Society for French History, Lubbock, TX, 1 October 2004).

as yet another source of residential pollution. Despite this stigma, servants nonetheless continued to function as extensions of the master's will, theoretically regulating access to the residence's social and working spaces. Ultimately, however, servants could hardly be trusted to police themselves.

Sensory pollution

A 1786 guide to healthful living counseled readers to ensure "the air you breathe is clear, pure, and calm. Flee that which is laden with a bad smell or the emanations of a cesspool."¹³ One could hardly write a better description of the eighteenth-century kitchen. If today the kitchen's fragrance signifies welcome domesticity, in the eighteenth century it signaled decay. "Worst was the kitchen," declares Alain Corbin in his history of odors, identifying the kitchen as the epicenter of the foul stenches of domesticity, whose fetid exhalations threatened to infect the rest of the household.¹⁴ So awful was the kitchen that it became emblematic of the eighteenth century's new architectural challenges. One architect claimed in 1728 that it was the configuration and positioning of the kitchen that best indicated a designer's skill: "It is in this section principally that one knows whether an architect is skilled" in the

¹³ *Étrennes aux vivans, ou l'art de vivre agréablement sans nuire à sa santé* (Paris: Guill. Leclerc, 1786), 2.

¹⁴ Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 166.

arrangement of interior space.¹⁵ Forty years later, another architect made essentially the same assertion.¹⁶

The concerns about a kitchen's effluvia first surfaced in 1673, when the architect François Blondel lamented "the odor of the kitchen and [its] meats."¹⁷ This smell of meat played a key role in Sebastian Leblond's 1710 attack on kitchen stench; when joined with charcoal and wastewater odors, it invaded the rest of the residence.¹⁸ The stench was particularly pervasive, with kitchens reeking of "the odor of Charcoal, which could be communicated to the Apartments."¹⁹ Indeed, architectural perspective drawings suggest that even when all other chimneys went cold, kitchens continued to belch smoke.²⁰ Kitchen smoke could

¹⁵ Charles-Etienne Briseux, *L'Architecture moderne ou l'art de bien bâtir pour toutes sortes de personnes tant pour les maisons de particuliers que pour les palais* (Paris: Claude Jombert, 1728), 56.

¹⁶ Charles-Antoine Jombert, *Architecture moderne, ou l'art de bien bâtir pour toutes sortes de personnes* (Paris: Chez l'Auteur, 1764), 113.

¹⁷ Louis Savot, *L'Architecture françoise des bastimens particuliers. Composée par Me. Louis Savot [...] avec des figures et des nottes de M. Blondel* (Paris: F. Clouzier l'aîné, 1673), 42.

¹⁸ Sebastian Leblond, "De la nouvelle manière de distribuer les plans," in *Cours d'architecture qui comprend les ordres de vignole, avec des commentaires, les figures et descriptions de ses plus beaux bâtimens, et de ceux de Michel-Ange, etc.*, ed. A.C. Daviler (Paris: Jean Mariette, 1710), 185*3.

¹⁹ Jacques-François Blondel, *De la distribution des maisons de plaisance et de la décoration des édifices en général* (Paris: Charles-Antoine Jombert, 1737), 38.

²⁰ Jean Marot, *L'Architecture françoise, ou recueil des plans, élévations, coupes et profils des églises, palais, hôtels et maisons particulières de Paris, et des Chasteaux et maisons de campagne ou de plaisance des environs, et de plusieurs autres endroits de France, bâties nouvellement par les plus habils architectes, et levées et mesurées exactement sur les lieux* (Paris: Jean Mariette, 1727), 96. The "Vue et perspective de l'Hostel de Bautru, du dessien de Mr. le Veau" shows

also physically damage objects it enveloped; it "spoiled and blackened furniture" in a residence.²¹ Regardless of the architect's skill, if the kitchen were "too close, the bad odor which it continuously exhales, joined to the harmful odor of charcoal and the smoke of dishes, penetrates the apartments, where it spoils and blackens paintings and gilding."²² The kitchen's smoke was understood to have dire health consequences as well, and one cook sought to limit the "accidents to which charcoal smoke frequently exposed him."²³ The kitchen's sensory pollution proved equally devastating to the space outside of the *hôtel*. Louis-Sébastien Mercier conceded that the street filth of Paris was "necessarily black" thanks to particles of iron flaking off of carriage wheels but blamed "the water flowing from kitchens" for rendering it "stinking."²⁴

The sensory threats did not end with smoke and odors; noise pollution regularly joined them on the list of complaints. Urban street noise could be avoided through careful orientation of the *corps de logis*, the master's portion of the residence devoted to living, dining, and socializing. In contrast, the sounds of the kitchen posed a more pervasive threat.²⁵ Kitchens positioned too close to the *corps de logis* left their masters "ceaselessly inconvenienced by the noise made by domestics and the

black smoke rising from the kitchen wing's chimney and none from any of the others.

²¹ Leblond, 185*3.

²² Jombert, 113.

²³ Louis Nivert, *Nouveaux fourneaux économiques et portatifs, extrait de la Gazette de santé, du dimanche 1er octobre 1780, no. 40.* (Paris: Veuve Ballard et fils, 1781).

²⁴ Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 12 vols. (Amsterdam: Yverdon, 1782-88), 213.

²⁵ Leblond, 185*1.

people working to prepare food there.²⁶ Annotations to a 1722 plan for the Palais de Bourbon noted the "care one had taken" in placing the bedroom above other rooms "in order to avoid . . . the noise and odor of the kitchen."²⁷ Architects worried in particular about residences where the kitchen lay under the dining room since servants made noise going "up and down" the stairs linking the two rooms.²⁸ Far from the "novel feature of domestic comfort" described by one architectural historian, such a communicating staircase threatened to admit the nuisances of the kitchen directly to dining and living areas.²⁹ Indeed, one of the most important tasks of the *maître d'hôtel* was to prevent, "as much as he can, the noise and tumult in the kitchen and *office*."³⁰ In the popular imagination, the kitchen was a ceaselessly noisy place; in one account of a kitchen brawl, the dispute was settled only after the "noise of their racket" reached the "Master's ears," prompting him to investigate "what was happening in his house."³¹

Human corruption

²⁶ Jombert, 113.

²⁷ Jacques-François Blondel, *Architecture françoise, ou recueil des plans, élévations, coupes, et profils des églises, maisons royales, palais, hôtels et édifices les plus considerables de Paris, ainsi que des châteaux et maisons de plaisir situés aux environs de cette ville, ou en d'autres endroits de la France, bâtis par les plus célèbres architectes, et mesurés exactement sur les lieux* (Paris: Charles-Antoine Jombert, 1752), 269.

²⁸ Leblond, 185*3; and Briseux, 56.

²⁹ Gallet, 65.

³⁰ Pierre Collet, *Instructions et prières à l'usage des domestiques* (Paris: Debure l'aîné, Herissant, Herissant, Tilliard, 1758), 306. The *office* prepared fruits and sweets; it could be incorporated into the kitchen or have its own distinct space.

³¹ *Relation de ce qui s'est fait et passé au sujet d'une Cuisinière qui avoit trois maris vivans* (Paris: Claude Hérisson, 1775).

Even more alarming than the kitchen's noise and odors was the threat posed by servants themselves. Architects not only aimed to place the kitchen out of view of its masters but also to keep its masters away from the eyes of those who worked in the kitchen. To this end, Sebastian Leblond suggested that the *corps de logis* act as a barrier between public and private residential spaces. Such an arrangement protected residents from "the sight of servants and strangers because one is not obliged to cross a courtyard to go to the garden"³² Tellingly, Leblond lumped "servants" together with "strangers." As masters retreated from the perceived corruption of the spaces like the kitchen, they increasingly associated their own servants with the public and the external, not the private and the domestic.

In addition to their cooks, kitchens often filled with a "crowd" of other household domestics jostling to take their meals.³³ Moreover, porters arriving with deliveries also clogged kitchens with an invasive horde of outsiders.³⁴ Kitchens thus could host an especially dense population of servants and strangers who threatened to disrupt domestic comfort. To reduce this sort of human pollution, some architects attempted to curb kitchen servants' movement within the household. The architect Blondel, for example, created a kitchen essentially sealed off from the rest of the residence:

I have only placed doors at the extremities of [the kitchen's] façade, in order to allow less freedom to the kitchen staff on

³² Leblond, 185*1-185*2.

³³ Ibid., 185*10. Leblond urged the use of separate dining areas "to serve the servants' meals and keep them from upsetting the kitchen by gathering there."

³⁴ Nicolas Le Camus de Mézières, *Le Génie de l'architecture, ou l'analogie de cet art avec nos sensations* (Paris: Le Camus de Mézières, Benoît Morin, 1780), 201.

the side of the terrace where it is situated and which lays in view of the château. I preferred to limit them to the exits on the courtyard which is intended for them.³⁵

Another architect proposed a similar design, giving the kitchen "an exit on the street, detached and distinct from the main entrance."³⁶ By turning its back to the *corps de logis* and hiding its workers and suppliers from sight, the kitchen would not imperil the senses of those on the other side. Masters and their guests could come and go without encountering the kitchen's effluvia. By limiting access to the rest of the *hôtel*, architects hid the spectacle of servants going about their labors.

Jean-François de Bastide's novel *La Petite maison* (1753) went so far as to propose the fantasy of removing the kitchen and servants entirely from sight. Sitting down to dinner, a guest was surprised to find no servants lurking about.

—"But where are the servants?" she asked. "Why this air of mystery?"

—"They never come in here," he responded, "and I thought that today it was even more prudent to banish them. They're gossips – they would give you a bad reputation – and I respect you too much. . . ."³⁷

The host had engineered his house to become a site of unbridled seduction, hidden from the wandering eyes and wagging tongues of servants. When the time came for dessert, "the table dropped into the kitchen – which operated in the basement – and from upstairs another table

³⁵ Blondel, *De la distribution des maisons de plaisance*, 79.

³⁶ Le Camus de Mézières, *Le Génie de l'architecture*, 202.

³⁷ Jean-François de Bastide, *La Petite maison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), 57.

descended instantly filling the opening created in the first floor, which was protected by a balustrade of gilt iron."³⁸ Thanks to this contraption, dishes came and went without human intervention, underscoring the disjuncture of servant and master space. According to architectural historian Gallet, such "ingenious devices introduced into the house were an expression of a twofold anxiety: to alleviate the drudgery of servants, but also to avoid their presence as far as possible by multiplying the means of serving oneself with the least effort."³⁹ Yet such devices equally insulated diners from the pollution of both servants and their spaces. No humans moved between the two areas of Bastide's house; clever engineering had established an impermeable barrier between *corps de logis* and kitchen.

By effectively quarantining servants, architects eliminated the dual threat of seeing and of being seen. Masters were not subjected to the spectacle of their servants, and servants had far less opportunity to spy on their masters. Yet the risk of such entirely parallel worlds was not so much that "convenience" or "comfort" might suffer, as one architectural historian proposes, but rather that servants might run amok absent any oversight.⁴⁰ Given servants' responsibilities for their master's health and well-being, the household's objects of value, and the extraordinary sums of money passing through the kitchen, to name a few, the danger was hardly academic.

The architect Le Camus de Mézières suggested that masters turn the tables on their servants by spying on them. By incorporating secret passageways into the walls, masters could "pass from one end [of the house] to the other without being seen." As they made their way through their

³⁸ Ibid., 59.

³⁹ Gallet, 114.

⁴⁰ Mignot.

residences they could watch their servants through "a little concealed opening at the top of each room." According to Le Camus de Mézières,

It is a way of keeping one's servants in check. It is used when the need arises, and the knowledge of its existence inspires respect. Any unwelcome curiosity can be obviated by closing off the opening with a locked flap, to which the Master alone has the key.⁴¹

Yet in Le Camus de Mézières's extreme scenario, the master has essentially abandoned the entire residence to the servants. Instead of allowing domestics to serve their masters discreetly, cramped secret passages become the site of the besieged master's last stand.⁴² The notion that servants and masters could coexist in separate and parallel worlds has collapsed, and masters have been reduced to peering out on them from cramped passageways. But Le Camus de Mézières also betrays a rather different anxiety about the threat posed by servants who might steal from or otherwise defraud their masters.

From a spatial perspective, servants by and large were charged with regulating themselves and their spaces. Perhaps as Le Camus de Mézières proposed, masters might carry a key or two to protect their secret spaces, but what about the dozens of other keys that controlled entry to the *hôtel*'s rooms, pantries, cupboards, and drawers? In fact, servants possessed many of these keys, and this control provoked no small amount of concern among their masters.

⁴¹ Nicolas Le Camus de Mézières, *The Genius of Architecture; or, The Analogy of that Art with our Sensations*, trans. David Britt (Santa Monica: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1992), 108.

⁴² Benhamou, for example, suggests that such secret passageways were for the use of servants: 6.

One man complained, "my servants have *my* keys in *their* pockets."⁴³ These keys tended to secure access to servants' "own" space, like their bedrooms and eating areas. In the 1760s, for example, the locksmith Bertin charged 1 livre 10 sous to clean the lock of one cook's bedroom as well as to furnish a new key.⁴⁴ In 1786, the locksmith Huard replaced the lock on the door to the dining room of the upper servants (*officiers*) with a "security lock" accompanied by two keys.⁴⁵ The kitchen, of course, was nearly always a heavily fortified space. An account of one kitchen's condition describes the room's "oak door" with its lock and key.⁴⁶ Another kitchen had three doors, each locked with a deadbolt.⁴⁷ Even a cook's stove could close and lock with a key.⁴⁸

Because domestics themselves were seen as part of the problem of corruption and pollution, contemporaries had a hard time accepting servants' assigned role in controlling and ordering their own space. In the comic verse *La Maltôte des cuisinières* (1724), one cook instructed another in the art of abusing the master's confidence: since she already had the keys to the wine cellar, why shouldn't the cook profit from the opportunity?⁴⁹ In François Boucher's 1735 painting *La Cuisinière*, the eponymous cook carried

⁴³ Petit Delamothe, *Mémoire à consulter pour Me Petit Delamothe, avocat, accusé, contre sa cuisinière, demanderesse en réparation d'honneur* (Paris: Veuve Hérissant), 14. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁴ Bibliothèque nationale de France, MSS Joly de Fleury 2489, 71.

⁴⁵ Archives nationales [hereafter AN] T 261/1 (1786). Cost: 14 livres.

⁴⁶ AN T 325 (1790).

⁴⁷ AN T 447 (1769).

⁴⁸ Nivert.

⁴⁹ *La Maltôte des cuisinières, ou la manière de bien ferrer la mule. Dialogue entre une vieille Cuisinière et une jeune Servante* (Riom: G. Valleyre, 1724), 7.

two keys tied to her apron: these keys indicated her master's delegation of authority, a responsibility which she wantonly neglected as she succumbed to seduction by another servant.⁵⁰ Her precariously balanced basket of eggs (with one egg already broken on the floor) not only symbolized the threat to her virginity but also suggested servant wastefulness at the master's expense.

Concerns regarding the permeability of the borders between the space of servants and masters spilled over into the legal world. In 1787 a certain Petit Delamothe accused his cook, Nanette Bailleux, of using her set of keys to rob him. Bailleux protested that she had never possessed keys to the cupboards in question, but her accuser relied on the assumption that most cooks would have had such a set of keys. Delamothe claimed that on the death of his wife he had closed all the cupboards and placed all of their keys in a locked drawer in his own desk.⁵¹ Nonetheless, the cook's keys allegedly allowed her to evade his protective measures and profit from the man's grief and distraction. In another lawsuit, Marie Forcade sued her deceased brother's cook's daughter, complaining that the girl often slept in a bedroom which "closed with the same key" as the one used by the master's own bedroom.⁵² Forcade's implication was clear: both master and cook's daughter shared access to each other's chambers. What else might have gone on behind these locked doors to which servants and even their children had keys?

⁵⁰ Both the original painting and two popular engravings of the work preserve this detail.

⁵¹ Joly de Fleury, *Précis pour la femme Bailleux, ci-devant cuisinière du sieur Petit, intimée, contre le sieur Petit de la Mothe, receveur des rentes à la ville, appellant* (Paris: N. H. Nyon, 1787), 3.

⁵² Joly de Fleury, *Observations sur le mémoire de Barbe Lievine Pieters, Appellante* (Paris: Knapen, 1755), 3.

The development of "private" and "domestic" spaces was thus shaped not just by the pursuit of new ideals like family intimacy or by the sudden development of an awareness of servants' watchful eyes. Instead it incorporated a reaction against the perceived material dangers of servants and their spaces. The fear of contamination, both physical and moral, drove masters and their architects to devise solutions to quarantine and regulate servants' movements and activities. But since servants themselves were charged with much of the responsibility of ordering and controlling their own spaces, this abdication of authority on the part of masters only encouraged greater worry about the conduct of servants within the residence.