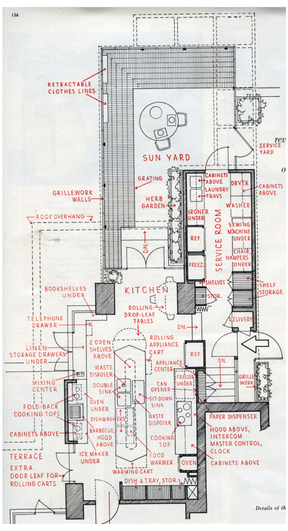
One Minute Modernist: Great Kitchens of Cincinnati

The kitchen has long been an important locus for Modernism and technology. Famous sisters Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe (who lived in Cincinnati in the 1830s) in their 1869 book, The American Woman's Home, saw the kitchen as a space neglected by male designers and one which could introduce women to progressive planning and innovations such as ice-boxes and stoves to ease their work and raise their status. Benita Otte, a woman designer at the Bauhaus, created a 1923 model kitchen that aimed to emancipate women and which German designer Margarete Schutte-Lihotzky used as inspiration for her famous Frankfurt Kitchen of 1926 that reduced space and increased efficiency. Over 10,000 were built. WWII saw the American men fighting abroad while women filler their jobs in factories and offices. At war's end, when the men returned, clever marketing of modern labor-saving devices such as electric ranges, refrigerators and dishwashers aimed to get women to return to the kitchen and the domestic sphere so men could have their jobs back.

Corbett House kitchen. Photograph by Ezra Stoller ©Esto. House Beautiful, February 1960

Cincinnati had at least two notable modern kitchens. The first resided in one of the earliest Modernist houses in the city, the 1938 home of architect John Becker. His wife, Marion Rombauer Becker, was more famous than him as she coauthored The Joy of Cooking, perhaps the best-known cookbook of all time (1931, republished continuously from 1936-present.) Sadly, the Beckers' Modernist house was demolished and Marion's kitchen lost. Cincinnati's famous kitchen was still-extant Corbett House in Hyde Park. Architect John DeKoven Hill, a pupil of Frank Lloyd Wright, designed the house for J. Ralph and Patricia Corbett, he the manufacturer of "Nutone" electronic household appliances, and she, Cincinnati's great philanthropist and patron of music. The house became House Beautiful magazine's 1960 Pace Setter house of the year and its kitchen was a nationally famous showcase of progressive design and technology. It includes an island, intercom, telephone, radio, television, dish washers, ovens, mixers, blenders, mobile appliance carts, and countless other automated devices.



Corbett House, kitchen plan with electronic appliances called out. House Beautiful, February 1960

Corbett House kitchen. Photograph by Ezra Stoller ©Esto. House Beautiful, February 1960.

The Corbett kitchen is now itself mobile. Patricia Corbett died in 2008; the house sold and has been remodeled. Chuck Lohre, a founder of cf3, Cincinnati's Modernist forum, dismantled and rescued the kitchen. The Cincinnati Art Museum expressed interest in it but then declined; the kitchen recently sold at auction to a movie set service for a rumored appearance on Mad Men, the retro television series, but that failed to materialize. This famous Modernist kitchen is currently in storage and in search of a home. Let's hope it find one, preferably in Cincinnati.

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