



Kitchen as a Material and Lived Space: Representations and Interpretations in Estonian Museums

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ABSTRACT

Kitchen has been one of the most intensively lived spaces at home, yet its furnishings have often vanished, especially in the 20th–21st centuries. The complex materiality of the kitchen related to multiple practices going beyond food production and consumption has rarely attracted curatorial interest in museums. This article presents a comparative analysis of four recent exhibitions in Estonia focusing on the kitchen space against the background of contemporary material culture theory and museum studies. We examine how kitchens were interpreted and represented, asking if and to what extent were the expositions based on ethnographic inquiry and how the stories of and practices associated with things were communicated to the audiences. Concurrent kitchen expositions and kitchens as parts of museum displays enable a novel methodological approach for studying the (re)presentation and interpretation of similar material objects. Besides reconstructing authentic milieus, the museums succeeded – to different extent and using different means – in conveying sensory and emotional experiences. In all cases, the social life of things was evoked, either by shedding light on the general and typical of particular periods, or by emphasising the individual choices and subjective experiences through the biographical approach. Altogether the exhibitions gave an unprecedented cumulative effect, outlining the unique memories of Estonian kitchens and the challenges and dilemmas of contemporary consumer society.

Introduction: kitchen materiality and kitchen practices in museums

During the past decades, a renewed interest in material culture has been evident in European ethnology, with a focus on human behaviours and relationships with the material world¹. Along with the shift of focus on everyday practices, the kitchen has gained prominence as a topic of analysis. Today, it is increasingly interpreted not just as a physical place, but as a space where domestic practices constitute complex “kitchen ecologies”, in which constellations of things, sensations, and skills mutually entangle (Pink 2012, 48–53). Similarly, it has been analysed as an orchestrating concept, focusing on the symbiotic relationships

and “ecology of goods” within the home (Hand & Shove 2004, 235–237).

These ideas resonate with recent developments in museology, where new approaches to material culture have transformed understandings of museum objects, highlighting the dynamics of practices related to them. Museological attention has shifted to the ways in which things may take on specific meanings and values (Macdonald 2006, 6; Karlskov Skyggebjerg 2016, 6–9). They are conceptualised not only as carriers of meanings or targets of interpretation, but also as objects of experience.

The object is once more at the heart of the museum, this time as a material focus of experience and opportunity, a subtle and nuanced, construct-

ed, shifting thing, but also physical, ever-present, beating pulse of potential. (Dudley 2012, 3.)

It is argued that in today's world objects at exhibitions obtain relevance as they not only convey one particular meaning, but are polysemantic and, for the visitors, are associated with several aspects of their life-worlds, and are open to various interpretations (Hahn 2016, 17).

However, as a rule, the kitchen is still displayed in the traditional manner in folk museums or home museums as part of historical reconstructions of domestic life. Exhibitions dedicated to the modern transformations of kitchen² are few and only some museums specialise entirely on kitchen history³. In Estonian museumscape, the kitchen and kitchen life have also been in a marginal position for a long time.

In the 1980s–1990s, the kitchen was studied in the context of home cultures and consumption, looking at how people appropriate their living environments by obtaining and rearranging objects, decoration, and renovation (Miller 1988; Gullestad 1992). With the phenomenological interest in experience, researchers' attention turned to how people bring things and surroundings to life and let them happen. Orvar Löfgren has emphasised the predicament of studying people's experience of everyday materiality as it is dominated by unreflected routines and practices: "this knowledge of mastering things, of navigating between the shelves in the kitchen or the local supermarket (...)" is hard to put in words as it belongs "to the category Jonas Frykman (1990) has called 'what people do but seldom say'" (Löfgren 1997, 104). Similarly, Daniel Miller has argued that what people do with objects is significant and, consequently, the criterion of mattering emerges largely through ethnographic enquiry (Miller 1998, 15-19).

More recently, Shove et al. have demonstrated how the development of kitchen technologies has facilitated traditional practices connected with cooking or dishwashing, but also induced new practices like a healthier diet, making cooking more enjoyable, and spending more time with others (2007, 34). As practices transform over time, familiar tools or infrastructures are put to different use or the social significance of the practice is redefined. What people take to be normal

is immensely malleable (Shove 2003, 199). Thus, kitchen materiality is reinterpreted according to the changing ideas about food habits, design or cleanliness.

This article presents a comparative analysis of four recent exhibitions in Estonia, focusing on the kitchen space against the background of contemporary material culture theory and museum studies. We examine how kitchen materiality and kitchen practices were interpreted and represented, and ask in what ways the museums were able to suggest novel approaches to kitchens and kitchen culture, relying on contemporary approaches in these disciplines. In our study we look at whether and to what extent the expositions were based on ethnographic inquiry and how the stories of and practices associated with things were communicated to the audiences.

Another major aspect to be studied in this context is the kitchen as a space of memory. This issue is closely related to the biographical approach to things in Anglo-American tradition, which focused on particular articulations between persons and objects (Kopytoff 1998; Appadurai 1998), as well as on how the meanings of things change over time as they are circulated through different social contexts (Tilley 2001, 264). Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* (Nora 1997) has been used to describe how remembering and recollecting takes place in the kitchen as a site of memory. Angela Meah and Peter Jackson focus on the materiality of kitchenscapes – both actual and remembered – and how these carry meanings for those who inhabit them. They call the kitchen a kind of "private living museum", a place in which objects of personal, artistic or cultural interest are curated, stored, and displayed to construct and reproduce family histories. Through particular objects, practices, multisensory memories, and individual remembrances "kitchen can become both a repository for and a carrier of memory – physical, symbolic and embodied" (Meah & Jackson 2016, 4-5, 17). In our analysis we will also tackle this question, asking how different museums were able to cope with the challenge of re-creating the private sphere of the domestic kitchen – a lived site of remembering – in the context in which the original actors and activities were no longer pre-

sent. How do such reconstructions contribute to the understanding of memory work?

In the context of studying everyday practices, the sensory aspects of interacting with material environments have been highlighted. Relying on empirical research on housework and home decoration, Sarah Pink writes about how such practices entail a constant recreation of the sensory environment (Pink 2004). Similarly, the embodied forms of knowledge and sensory experiences are gaining more prominence in museums. Sandra Dudley emphasises that “embodied and emotional engagements with objects” should be a “fundamental building block of twenty-first-century museum visit” (Dudley 2012, 11), while David Howes claims that “perhaps the most salient trend in the new museology has been the rehabilitation of touch” (Howes 2014, 259). In everyday life kitchen is a place where we experience a variety of textures, sounds, smells, and tastes. Thus, our enquiry also concerns the sensory environment at the kitchen exhibitions – whether and how effectively it was created, whether it enabled to produce a more active and participatory relationship with the museum (cf. Bennett 2006, 277; Gregory & Witcomb 2007). This is of interest both in the context of contemporary museological theory and practical perspectives of Estonian museumscape facing increasing competition in the field of edutainment.

Firstly, we will give a brief overview of the history of the Estonian kitchen and describe our research object and methods. Secondly, we tackle the curatorial concepts and challenges, and then proceed to analyse the outcome – how kitchen materialities and practices were presented to the audiences. Finally, we focus on specific groups of objects, examining in a comparative manner how similar things have been (re)presented and interpreted. This enables a closer scrutiny of museums’ approaches to kitchen materialities.

A brief history of kitchen in Estonia

In Estonian peasant culture, the kitchen as a separate room primarily dedicated to cooking is a rather late phenomenon, which started to emerge in the

late 19th century. For a long time, “living kitchen” remained a multifunctional space where household work was done and, on everyday occasions, guests were received (Saron 2010; Pärdi 2012). In the countryside, the big old multifunctional living room with a kitchen corner remained a reality for much of the pre-war era (cf. Lindqvist 2009, 170). By the first decades of the 20th century, ideas about modern domestic economy, including the rational kitchen, were familiar among the higher and middle classes. Through a network of women’s societies, the press, and courses, the principles of practical, hygienic, and healthy home environment, largely following the Scandinavian example, were spread. However, in everyday practice a new mentality took root slowly and new requirements for kitchen furniture “were probably followed only in some model or training farms or domestic economy schools” (Saron 2010, 24). By the late 1930s, many new city flats in Estonia had already modern fitted kitchens, sometimes with home appliances like electric cookers or refrigerators.

During the war and the post-war years, people’s primary concern was survival; thus everyday materiality was “conserved” for a long time. In numerous homes, especially in the villages, the 19th-century milieu was preserved even until the 1960s. In city suburbs, bedsitters (*kööktuba*) were also common. At the same time in the Western world kitchens in modern flats with open spaces underwent a drastic change, in which “leisure, beauty, and sociability figure alongside themes of functional efficiency” (Hand & Shove 2004, 244). Estonian women had to struggle for the provision of basics, but in the western rationalised and modern kitchen the main aim of the housewife was to provide a pleasant and cosy environment for her husband and children (Spechtenhauser 2006, 45). While the kitchen of the 1930s was a demarcated workstation for the intelligent housewife, the open kitchen of the 1950s was integrated into the family space of the home (Saarikangas 2006). In the new Soviet industrially constructed houses from the late 1950s, the tiny kitchen was separated from the living area and marginalised, because people were either supposed to eat in canteens or warm up canned food (cf. Reid 2010). Yet, in Estonia

Museum	Title of the exhibition	Curators	Themes	Time
Hiiumaa Museum (HM)	The Kitchen	Kauri Kiivrimees, Helgi Põllo	Domestic kitchen interiors from the 1930s to the 1990s	September 2015 - December 2016
Estonian Applied Arts and Design Museum (EAADM)	The Kitchen. Changing Space, Design and Applied Arts in Estonia	Kai Lobjakas	Design of kitchen space, furniture and design from the 1930s to the 2000s	February-May 2016
Estonian National Museum (ENM)	We Cook	Pille Runnel Agnes Aljas	Home cooking / professional cooking from the 19th to the 21st century	since October 2016
Estonian Open-Air Museum (EOAM)	(a) Härjapea farm (b) Setu and Peipsi Russian farm complexes (c) Kuie school-house	Maret Tamjärv, Juta Saron, Elvi Nassar, Merike Lang, Dagmar Ingi	(a) reconstruction of a historical farm kitchen from the 1930s; (b) historical copies of farm kitchens from eastern and south-eastern Estonia from the 19th century to the 1960s; (c) kitchen of a 19th-century schoolhouse transferred to the museum.	(a) since May 2007 (b) since May 2015 (c) since September 2000

Table 1. Kitchen exhibitions and kitchen displays studied.

home cooking remained important despite the cramped conditions. The kitchen also preserved its function as a social space where the family gathered and friends popped in for a chat.

Due to the limited choice of prefabricated furniture, Estonian kitchens looked quite similar until the 1990s, although often people built furniture and decorated their domestic spaces themselves to add some individuality. The transition to market economy brought about a kitchen renovation boom, domestic technologies became a normality. The new Western trends and lifestyles transformed the meaning of the kitchen space – not only convenient for cooking, but also a cosy place of leisure and pleasure. With the kitchen opening into the living room, Estonians have recreated the traditional multifunctional kitchen. Despite high design standards, kitchen is still often characterised as the “heart of the home” (Kannike 2002, 131).

Museum contexts and research methods

Until recently there have been no temporary or permanent exhibitions related to the topic of

kitchens in Estonian museums, although kitchens are organic parts of several farm-museums⁴, the farm complexes of the Estonian Open Air Museum as well as the 19th-century citizen’s museums in Tartu and Rakvere, and home museums of prominent people (e.g. the museums of the Estonian writers Vilde and Tammsaare in Tallinn and Kreutzwald in Võru).

The museums we selected for our study can be divided into two groups: museums that display kitchens as part of their permanent exhibition and special exhibitions about kitchen history or cooking.⁵ The majority of the cases represent 20th-century modern kitchens – both rural and urban – but there are likewise some examples from the late 19th century and the present time.

These new exhibitions offered great potential due to the increasing popularity of the topic of food and cooking among museum visitors from all generations, but also due to a novel approach: for the first time attention focused on the modern kitchen. Yet, the curators had to face several challenges, because most of the necessary furniture, appliances or everyday items were not available in the museums’ collections. Unlike living rooms, kitchens have rarely been documented (except for cooking corners of barn-dwellings) or collected,

and so the respective pieces are few and not always representative. When renovating kitchens, people have often thrown away the old furniture or stored it in a shed or summer house. Thus, the materiality of kitchens has often “vanished”. Photographs of kitchens and people in them as well as of everyday food are also rare in Estonian museum archives as they have not been considered important enough to be documented. In some cases, people do not want to share their photographs because they feel their kitchens or cooking ways are too ordinary or not up to standard, i.e., not clean or modern enough.⁶

In Estonian museums changes in kitchen culture have not deserved much attention for several reasons. In pre-World War II ethnology and museology, the main interest focused on peasant culture and elements of the traditional way of life that had been preserved. This approach largely continued in the Soviet period. In some articles about living conditions and food culture in the countryside (Peterson 1964; 1966; Karu 1964; Vöti 1962; 1966) kitchens were briefly mentioned, but 20th-century furniture and cooking largely remained beyond the interest of Soviet ethnography. In the early 21st century, some aspects of Soviet everyday life were examined by ethnologists and design historians, which resulted in a few exhibitions⁷ and publications dealing with food culture and domestic material culture (e.g. Piiri 2006; Kannike 2005). Therefore, the way kitchens are conceptualised at the new exhibitions studied in this article marks a turning point in many respects.

The idea to establish the EOAM, based on Scandinavian examples, was first proposed in 1913, but the museum opened to the public only in 1964. It is distinguishable from all other museums, being a large complex (72 ha) of historical buildings (74 buildings from the past 200 years). It is located in the territory of the former Baltic German summer estate Rocca al Mare, in the coastal area of Tallinn. The authentic houses or their trustworthy copies have historically reliable interiors. Like in other open air museums worldwide, the overall atmosphere is that of a separate world of the past, into which the visitor enters gradually by walking along the “vil-

lage streets” and in farmyards. Four kitchens are in regular use and open all year round. Härjapea and Kuie houses are originals transferred to the museum. Setu and Peipsi-Russian complexes are recently built copies: the former built according to original plans and photographs and the latter following the general building style of the region.

Hiiumaa Museum is the leading cultural and heritage institution on the second biggest island of Estonia. The museum is known for its innovative role in the Estonian museum landscape, and has initiated several major cultural events like the Kärkla Café Days and active involvement of the public. Long before experience economy became fashionable, the museum organised thematic events dedicated to specific eras, social groups or holidays, in which visitors could play certain roles and sense the past through touch, smell, and taste. The main building of the museum is located in the longest wooden house in Kärkla, built in the 1830s–1840s for the administration of the broadcloth factory. Today the renovated house welcomes the visitor with a cosy atmosphere into which the 19th- and early 20th-century interiors and objects blend naturally.

The ENM was founded already in 1909, but the first house specially built for the museum with a novel permanent exhibition opened only on October 1st, 2016. The main emphasis in the collection work and exhibitions has been on Estonian everyday life from the 19th century until the present day, and also on Finno-Ugric cultures. The focus of the new permanent exhibition is on presenting the heterogeneity and diversity of local culture. The new permanent exhibition offers visitors varied sensory experiences through multimedia devices, interactive databases, and various material objects. During the past decade, the museum has actively used participatory methods for staging new exhibitions and examining topics of contemporary society to give voice, besides experts, to the groups studied, striving for the content to be personal and empathic to individual experiences (Runnel & Järv 2011; Aljas, Kurg, Rattus & Karro-Kalberg 2016).

The majority of the EAADM’s collections are made up of unique artistic objects. During the past 15 years, the museum has extended its focus on

design history. Although most exhibitions have been classical displays of professional art, some of them have also touched upon everyday life, for example, an overview of the hugely popular interior decoration journal of the Soviet period, *Kunst ja Kodu* ('Art and Home') in 2009. The kitchen exhibition of 2016 in many respects broadened the traditional approach of the museum.

Compared to the first examples, the architecture of the EAADM and the ENM provides a different, more sterile, and more "academic" context to the exhibitions. The former museum is located in a 17th-century storehouse in Tallinn old city centre. The interior spaces have high ceilings and massive white walls creating a solid, yet at the same time visually neutral atmosphere for varied displays. The novel house of the ENM – a massive concrete building surrounded by glass block ramps – is the most contemporary and largest museum space in Estonia and also in the Baltic States.⁸ In the permanent exhibition hall multiple thematic displays are located next to each other, which emphasises the dialogue between eras and cultures.

To collect materials for our study, we repeatedly visited museum exhibitions and events from March until November 2016, and conducted interviews with curators and other members of the museum personnel, who had been involved in designing the exhibition. The interviews were carried out in respective museum kitchens and exhibition halls. The interview questions were related to the museum and the exhibition, to the kitchen and food culture. In the interviews, the curators reflected on their initial visions, the methods of communicating and realising their ideas, and the feedback from visitors. Additionally, we used secondary materials on the museums' websites and on Facebook. In some cases, articles or books published by museum researchers provided valuable supplementary information. We also participated in some of the events organised during the exhibitions.⁹

Curatorial concepts and challenges

Although the general topic and titles of the exhibitions studied are quite similar, in each case the

specific focus of the display was different. It depended on the museum's profile and goals, previous research, and programmes as well as resources (collections, budget, workforce, space).

The exhibition titled "Kitchen" ([KØØK]) at the HM aimed to explore a topical issue that would be attractive to a wide audience. Over the past few years Hiiumaa has gained popularity as culinary destination and interest in the island's food heritage is active. The curators regarded the kitchen not only as a room for cooking, but as the key space of domestic everyday life, the multifunctional "heart of the home" or "symbol of domestic life" (KK). The curators' idea was "not a historical copy, but rather a *memory of a period kitchen* (our emphasis – authors) with its objects and character" (HP). Their primary aim was to enable people to enter the interiors, feel the atmosphere of a certain era, and examine the objects closely through all senses. Another aim was to draw attention to the changes in the forms or meanings of everyday objects with the same function (e.g. cookers, shopping bags, etc.) and transformations in daily practices, such as cooking or washing. In this way, people would be encouraged to reflect on the contrasts and continuities in the familiar environment over the years.

To personalise the interiors and eras and associate the material with the history of Hiiumaa, curators relied on interviews and created generalised portraits of housewives. The latter were performed by the museum staff at some museum events and their stories were posted on Facebook to advertise the exhibition. To emphasise homeliness, it was decided not to display exhibition texts in the traditional manner, but "hide" them into interior details. As the museum's repositories are limited and food culture has been a marginal topic for research until now, kitchen furniture and items are few. Most objects had to be collected or borrowed specially for the exhibition, using second-hand shops, the press, and social media. Public reaction to the appeals made by the museum was not very active, so most of the objects were found through personal networks. Since the museum personnel is small, it is impossible to change temporary exhibitions often. This imposes restrictions on the construction and structure

of the displays that must be suitable for different activities and events. Staged kitchens with temporarily added seasonal details provided a flexible environment for a variety of educational and entertaining programmes. Visitors could come and look at cooking demonstrations and participate in a playful manner.

Although at the EAADM the main axis of the exhibition “Kitchen. Changing Space, Design and Applied Art in Estonia” was the modernisation of the Estonian kitchen from the architectural and artistic viewpoint, starting from the 1930s until today, the curator wanted to shed light on the wider social and everyday context of these developments. By choosing a topic that was presumed to be of interest to different segments of visitors, the aim of the exhibition team was to attract the part of the public that usually would not come to an art museum. Accordingly, new types of sources from other museums and archives as well as private collections were used (everyday objects, posters, photographs, TV-shows) to offer insights into non-professional home decoration, food culture, and technological developments. Compared with the biographical approach in Hiiumaa, here more attention was paid to the historical accuracy of all objects. The educational aspect was a priority in the concept of the exhibition. The accompanying texts gave information about the ideology of kitchen design through decades, emphasising the role of architects and designers. The curator and designers decided not to opt for full-scale reconstructions of the kitchens, but preferred to put on display parts of furniture and give impressions of the historical spaces using large photographs and drawings.

The preparation process for the exhibition revealed that even some most typical pieces of Estonian 20th-century kitchen furniture were missing from the museums. This concerned not only pre-war objects, but also Soviet-period interiors that had been replaced as soon as it became possible in the 1990s. This wave of remodelling kitchens reflected radical changes in the routines and aspirations related to domestic life. As Shove et al. have pinpointed, “people modify and replace in an attempt to synchronise or manage gaps between existing possessions and visions of future performance” (Shove et al. 2007, 15).

An important criterion in the selection of the items to be displayed was their aesthetic attractiveness and cleanliness. The curator decided not to display a unique pre-World War II kitchen chair, because it needed restoration: “I would have liked to show it, but it would have frightened the visitors with its condition” (KL). According to the curator, the visitors also expect the exhibited items to be beautiful.

The exhibition titled “We cook” at the ENM does not focus directly on kitchens, but mainly on diverse aspects of cooking. It also puts the aesthetic aspects of food culture into the spotlight, although from a somewhat different angle, combining artistic and ethnographic approaches. For the visitor, the composition of objects similarly offers a visually enjoyable impression with a combination of colours, forms, and contrasts. The idea of the display is to draw attention to significant details of food culture through non-traditional forms of display. For instance, dishes, ladles or knives are not organised into historically authentic groups on tables or in showcases, but mounted in rows on huge inclined walls. In this way, the exhibition underlines the trend that aesthetic aspects are increasingly important in today’s food culture. People take pride in the home kitchens not only because of their effectiveness, but also because of their design.

“We cook” is not attempting to give a historical overview of Estonian cuisine, but rather raise issues and questions for further examination. One of the curators, Pille Runnel, stressed that she did not consider herself a food historian and the curatorial concept relied on her background in museology, communication, and consumption research. Although opened as a part of the new permanent exhibition, the curators emphasised the temporary character of this display and expressed hope that it will be followed by other exhibitions, exploring aspects of food culture in depth. The purpose of the exhibition is to emphasise the importance of food in everyday culture and shed light on different processes associated with it from both professional and domestic viewpoints. Another aim is to test different methods of documentation and museological presentation. The curators’ voices do not dominate; they

are like conductors who have tried to combine the voices of professional chefs, film directors, photographic and video artists as well as nutritionists. The main topics and conceptual ideas are presented to the visitors not directly, but rather through hints or new viewpoints. The curators wanted the objects to give rise to different conversations and interpretations, and the criterion of historical representativity was not decisive in the choice of objects.

At the EOAM kitchens are an integral part of the permanent exhibition of farmhouses from different Estonian regions, dating from the 19th century until the early Soviet period. All of them have been furnished on the basis of the museum collections and fieldwork data. The museum has a long tradition of organising major events during folk calendar festivals. The museum personnel and caretakers of the farms often enact different roles, using living history techniques. The kitchens are given an important role in the interaction with the visitors. Härjapea farm introduces the everyday environment and activities in the Estonian village in the 1930s. The kitchen furniture is historically accurate and the oven and stove were rebuilt with the idea of using them regularly in museum programmes. Similarly, Kuie schoolhouse with a kitchen serves as the major educational centre of the museum (Lang 2005, 67-68). The Setu farm and Russian Old Believer's House were built with the prospect of being fully "working" complexes. In the former, there are two kitchens – one from the late 19th-early 20th century and the other from the 1950s-1960s, which for the first time enables the museum to include the Soviet period into educational programmes. Both farms house the museum's Centre of Multinational Estonia, which organises thematic days, workshops, and fairs, in which cooking and food occupies an important position.

While previously the emphasis was more on the demonstrations of farmwork and crafts, in recent years the museum has organised various activities connected with food: food days and fairs, workshops and demonstrations. This illustrates a wider trend in museum communication since 1980s, in which the ability of food to reveal

cultural practices and interpersonal connections has been given more prominence (Moon 2015).

Kitchens within museumsapes

The general trend that contemporary museums do not aim to reconstruct the past in full detail or judge contradictory events or phenomena, is also reflected in the changing role of material objects and material environments. The examination of the exhibited kitchens enables us to pinpoint how the curators have implemented their ideas and strategies by making use of the museum space. The diverse materiality of museum spaces under study sets the general frame for interpreting the kitchen exhibitions or kitchen interiors within.

At the EOAM, the borders of the kitchen expositions are blurred as they are parts of full architectural complexes. The caretakers do not sit in the corners of the rooms, but are engaged in daily duties, leaving an impression of ongoing life just like on a regular farm. The kitchens contribute to the overall aim that, at the farms, the visitor should get the impression that "the host or hostess has just arrived home and comes to talk to us" (Lang 2005, 69).

The fact that the explanatory texts are outside of the kitchens, not on the walls or next to objects, also contributes to the feeling of a "living" kitchen. The visitors can walk into the interiors, look and sometimes hear the sounds, and smell the aromas of cooking, although they are not supposed to touch the objects. The practices connected with the kitchen are extended to other parts of the dwellings, for example, making cottage cheese or baking bread, gardening or goat tending. The EOAM has had to find a balance between using authentic collection objects and those usable in participatory programmes.

In Härjapea farmhouse all the interiors have been furnished exactly like they were in the 1930s. Although not everything was preserved, local villagers described all the objects in detail to the ethnologists. The kitchenware originates from this period, but the curators and caretakers continue to look for the original items in antique shops. "If we go there, we keep an eye open

for such things. Working in a museum is a way of life.” (BS) Here the material environment of a well-to-do farm of the era gets a wider context through an additional photo-and-text exhibition in the granary, titled “A dream of a modern farm in 1918-1939”, which introduces the ideals and reality in Estonian homes before World War II. This part of the exposition is related to the exhibition at the EAADM, complementing the latter’s “ideal landscape” with facts and comments about real-life practice. There are “food Sundays” with cooking demonstrations, using mostly seasonal products. Although visitors show a keen interest in participatory activities, the farm kitchen is too small and there are no sewer pipes, so people just watch and taste the food. In Kuie schoolhouse the kitchen is rather small and plain, but the attractive elements are jars and cans on the shelves containing herbal teas, grain coffee or St John’s bread, which are unfamiliar to most visitors and arouse curiosity. Here it is the smells that mainly create the homely atmosphere. The caretaker dries apples and herbs for tea, makes juice and jam, and during special events some food demonstrations are scheduled. For example, on St Michael’s Day visitors can see sausage making and rutabaga baking, and on the Estonian Bread Day special bread dishes have been made.

In the Peipsi Russian farm there are fewer museum items than in other houses; still, if possible, original objects are used. Every weekend the “housewife” prepares oven dishes, makes pies, biscuits, Old Believers’ “cooked sugar”, and samovar tea. The Setu farm kitchen is unique for its regional ceramics and kitchenware dating from the 19th century, and Soviet-period kitchen furniture from the Khrushchev’s Thaw era that is a rarity and cannot be seen in any other Estonian museum. In the second, “new” kitchen, Setu dishes, for example, curd with cumin seeds, cold soup or gingerbread with greaves are prepared on weekends and for special events. Since the rooms are filled with nice aromas, visitors often believe that people actually live in the house. All in all, the kitchens of the EOAM have a role in creating a complete atmosphere of living history, in which the specific details or practices of a particular era are emphasised.

The kitchen exhibition at the HM presents most realistic and most lived-like walk-in kitchen interiors. The visitor can first look through the window into a 1930s kitchen, and after that enter the post-war era, starting from the 1950s–1960s kitchen, walking through the 1970s–1980s kitchen, and ending up in the 1990s kitchen. All interiors are created with ethnographic accuracy and are full of significant objects of the respective periods. Extra attention is paid to the material of floor and wall covers as well as lighting. The fact that all kitchen interiors are situated close to each other and are separated with temporary partitions creates the possibility for noticing similarities and differences in the furniture, technologies, cooking utensils, and other objects used in the household. Furthermore, it generates a representation of the kitchen as a space connecting different generations or different rooms of someone’s home. Here the visitors’ contact with the material space is intimate since they can open the doors and drawers, touch all the objects on display, and even rearrange them within one kitchen. Although the sensory aspects of the museum experience were considered very important, not all the ideas could be realised; for instance, sounds and smells proved to be technically too difficult (although in the 1970s–1980s kitchen people could smell spices from small jars). In this exhibition space the texts are merged with the elements of the interior – into a wall calendar, newspaper or recipe collection. Thus the visitors are encouraged to look into the details of the “home” they have entered and the curators’ voice remains discrete.

The other two kitchen exhibitions are different in the organisation of space and design, and a clear distance is created between the visitor and the showcases or exposition surfaces. In both cases the compositions of kitchen/cooking objects are visually attractive and can be perceived as integral artistic installations.

At the EAADM, the central place in the exhibition room was given to unique design objects (tableware, kitchenware) introducing the style of prominent artists. The ideas and ideals of the kitchen and their historical development showcased in plans and drawings by architects, kitch-



Figure 1. A view into the exhibition space at the Estonian Applied Arts and Design Museum exhibition “Kitchen. Changing Space, Design and Applied Art in Estonia”. Photograph: Paul Kuimet.

en design examples from the magazines, etc., are in the foreground, whereas the lived materiality of the kitchens is implicit. Immediately after entering the exhibition hall the visitor faces a niche with a photograph from the 1930s ideal modern kitchen in white colours and a typical plywood kitchen chair of the period. The same technique is used throughout the exhibition design – mediated materiality combined with real objects. This is partly also due to practical reasons – the missing parts of the furniture are filled with drawings. The accompanying text gives an overview of the social and political reasons behind the modernisation of Estonian domestic kitchens starting from the 1920s. The main emphasis is on architects and home economy literature ideals rather than on particular lived kitchens of the period. The exhibition displays the changing forms of kitchen objects, including examples of both industrial and artistic design. Visually, the central position is given to a huge white horizontal space covered with colourful de-

signer kitchenware and cooking utensils from the 1930s until the 1990s. The everyday materiality of the kitchens was brought to the exhibition hall via a participatory initiative – the visitors were encouraged to bring to the museum photographs of their own (former) kitchens which were displayed on a separate wall at the end of the exhibition hall. The response to this action was not very active, but about a dozen people who reacted were quite enthusiastic, sending several pictures. The result was an interesting mix of designer kitchens, DIY interiors and typical Soviet-time spaces.

The space of the exhibition “We cook” at the ENM is limited to one relatively large rectangular room with a high ceiling and neutral white walls. The exhibits are placed on white slopes on an open wooden framework, which clearly separates the objects from their original context (unlike at the EOAM and the HM where they blended in with the interior). Similarly to the EAADM, the concept of “table” is central in the design of the ENM



Figure 2. A view into the exhibition “We cook” at the Estonian National Museum.
 Photograph: Karin Leivatagija

kitchen exhibition, although the approach is different. Here the underlying concept of multivocality has resulted in a more variegated pattern. Whereas at the EAADM the “table” was “laid” in the classical style, at the ENM several styles of display are mixed. As a result, the dichotomy of the traditional/domestic and the professional/institutional becomes visible. The space is also structured into two parts according to the content: one of them deals with professional and the other with domestic aspects and objects of cooking. The lived materiality of the kitchen is brought to the exhibition hall via the mediation of AV-screens that not just complement objects but form independent exhibits, add dynamics, and evoke unexpected dialogues with three-dimensional material exhibits. Videos recorded for the exhibition show cooking as a process, demonstrating restaurant or home kitchens in which the chefs or home cooks follow their usual routines. While men appear as chefs, the theme of the do-

mestic kitchen is presented through women and this might lead the visitor to contemplate the gender issues. Liina Siib’s photographic exhibit “Women in the kitchen” documents Estonian women cooking everyday dishes in their kitchens. During the first months after opening the exhibit was ironically positioned in a backward corner of the room evoking ironical associations with the artist’s previous exhibition “Women take little space”¹⁰, whereas later enlarged photos were set on the walls thereby creating more equal dynamics between domestic and professional cooking.

Objects in and around kitchens

Concurrent kitchen expositions and kitchens as parts of museum displays enable a comparative examination of how similar material objects have been (re)presented and interpreted. We chose some parts of the kitchen – pantries, cupboards,



Figure 3. Pantries at the exhibition “Kitchen” at the Hiiumaa Museum (left) and in Härjapea Farm at the Estonian Open Air Museum (right). Photographs: Ester Bardone.

and cabinets – and some sets of objects for a closer scrutiny of museums’ approaches to kitchen materialities. Thus, the exhibitions highlight the hidden social life of several objects, their “adventures” in and outside of kitchens, their life cycles and “afterlives”.

Traditionally, in Estonian homes there has been an important “extension” of the kitchen – the pantry – nowadays often replaced by the refrigerator and cabinetry (cf. Seiberling Pond 2007). Two pantries can be seen in the exhibitions studied: one at the HM and another at the Härjapea farm at the EOAM. Whereas the kitchen reconstructions provide a snapshot from a certain decade, a look into the pantry can reveal a more long-term accumulation of domestic materiality. Usually it was not only a temporary food storage, but gradually became a cross-section of different eras displaying layers of objects – a repository of family history (cf. Meah and Jackson 2016). The pantry of the EOAM is a reconstruction of a stor-

age space in an exemplary farm from the 1930s. Even more than the kitchen itself, it highlights the fact that the family was quite wealthy and the housewife had graduated from a home economics school. On the nicely decorated shelves bottles, bowls, and jugs of the era are carefully divided into groups according to function, as the guidelines of the period required. The farm products and rows of preserves bear witness of the diligence of the housewife. The other pantry displays some continuity (e.g. the style of jam jar rows is very similar), but here the materiality is more casually organised and the pattern of things also hints at the Soviet-time peculiarities of consumption and concerns of domestic economy. For example, there are jars of instant coffee (in short supply in the 1980s) next to home appliances (a small oven, a table fan), which have been put away “just in case”. Rubber boots may create associations with everyday routine work in the rural household.

Like pantries, kitchen cupboards and cabinets are also partly hidden spaces where food and utensils are kept, but what also accumulate other everyday objects and preserve specific smells. There are many parallels in the processes of collecting and displaying these items at different exhibitions. At the HM, the 1950s–1960s kitchen cupboard was found in the house of a colleague. The 1980s mass-produced kitchen cupboard was obtained from a house on sale – it was full of kitchenware and even the drawers had preserved their original content and smells. The visitors were allowed to open the drawers to see a familiar messy mixture of bottle caps, plastic bags, wires, old manuals, etc. These drawers from the actual lived kitchen eloquently display the “throwntogetherness” (Massey 2005, 140–142) encountered in everyday storage places that shelter not just things but also memories related to them (cf. Löfgren 2016).

The kitchen cupboard in Härjapea Farm at the EOAM is interesting because it represents a built-in model that was propagated in the 1930s. It was reconstructed at the museum, relying on the marks on the ceiling and detailed accounts of neighbours. In this manner, the kitchen space tells the story of the era and the owners. Similarly, the kitchen at the Setu farm was built, relying on fieldwork materials from Setumaa district as well as the curator’s own childhood memories from the region. Thus, both kitchen reconstructions are based on biographical narratives about the kitchen space, objects, and practices (cf. Miller 1998; Hoskins 2006). The cupboards in the living room and kitchen of the Setu farm, dating from the 1950s–1960s, are originals specially collected for the exposition. The kitchen sideboard was especially difficult to get as it had already become a rarity. It is now full of kitchenware, but also other things that were used in the household of that era, such as oil for the kerosene lamp. The drawers are full of cutlery and other necessary cooking utensils.

At the EAADM finding kitchen cupboards typical of Estonian homes from the 1930s to the 1980s proved to be surprisingly difficult. Therefore, the 1930s cupboard was displayed as a photograph, and the 1960s kitchen was represented by a well-preserved fragment the curator was

happy to have obtained from an old lady. The new trend presenting the kitchen as a status symbol and place of socialisation was marked by a mobile high-tech design kitchen island.

Besides the reconstructed sections of kitchen materiality like pantries, cupboards, and designer objects referring to kitchen practices, there are assemblages of kitchen objects that are not displayed in their context, but united into new compositions at the exhibitions to raise issues of remembering, and entanglement of human biographies with biographies of things.

The ENM exhibition is built upon contrasts and surprises. One of the most impressive sections of “We cook” is a white wall full of cups, saucers, and plates mostly from the 1960s–1970s, some also from earlier or later periods. This symmetrical and visually appealing display is at first sight similar to the central “table” full of designerware covered as if for a big party at the EAADM, where it emphasises a sort of ideal “kitchen landscape”. At the ENM, if the visitor does not read the text, the exhibit may be perceived just as an overview of Soviet mass-produced objects. But the curator’s text, the personal and even touching essay about her own grandmother, titled *Grandma’s kitchenware*, makes the visitor realise that the objects speak about remembering and forgetting. They are vehicles of memory, illuminating the biographical perspective of kitchenware (cf. Sutton & Hernandez 2007; Meah & Jackson 2016). This collection was the only thing that was left of grandmother’s big household. For the children and grandchildren (but also visitors with similar experience) they evoke memories about how grandmother cooked, how the food smelled and tasted, how the recipes changed over time, and how the family met at birthdays or on ordinary summer mornings.

“Looking at the dinner plate, homemade cutlets and fresh potatoes come to mind, making your mouth water. The resulting associations with smells and tastes set off the „mental cinema“ of memory [...] Disappearance of the utensils used for preparing the food has a symbolic significance – as they disappear, memories of grandmother’s cooking also fade. Knowledge related to cooking in the sense of a manual activity is vanishing.” (curator’s text at the exhibition)

Whereas at the EAADM the design of kitchen objects is highlighted by detailed information about each item (author, title, date), valuing its uniqueness, the cups and plates at the ENM are displayed without this specific data. The curator explains it: “Biographical objects are authentic rather by what they evoke than by what they are. The value of the object is embedded in its story“ (PR). Actually this is the first time an Estonian museum has collected a full collection of a family’s tableware. Here a certain parallel arises with the objects displayed at the HM, some of which also get additional layers of meaning through the stories of “housewives” – how the things were obtained and what role they played within the consumption culture of the era and of a particular family. Whereas in Hiiumaa the exposition aimed towards a realistic reconstruction, the ENM opted for an aesthetic assemblage of trivial objects. Without reading the curator’s text, this composition would be just an anonymous decorative composition.

Two collections of mundane objects – kitchen tins and ladles – also reveal different ways of collecting and displaying everyday materiality in the museum context. At the EAADM a set of kitchen tins belonging to a private collection and dating from the 1920s until the 1980s was displayed in a separate smaller room on the upper floor of the exhibition, creating an independent single-themed space. This part of the exhibition explains the longer history of kitchen tin production in Estonia, especially their different designs. Some sets of tins – for instance red tins with white polka dots (a design idea from the Western pop-culture of the period) produced by factory Norma and originating from the 1960s – have become iconic symbols of kitchen life for several generations. The text of the exhibit states: “There are multiple recollections related to them – how the tins were a kind of currency and exchange goods, they were valued as a present and as a bribe.” However, according to the overall curatorial concept, the stories of tin owners are not displayed and perhaps the collector was not even interested in them. Only a few tins reveal their actual use - there are handwritten paper labels stuck to them with the names of ingredients different from what is originally printed (e.g.

“black currant“ on the jar named “flour”), which shows that people have applied their own everyday creativity to industrially designed objects. As such, the tins are an interesting example of the domestication of mass-produced objects into the particular “kitchen ecology“.

The ENM has displayed a set of ladles from the museum’s collection, providing comments on the museum collection policies. Numerous ladles have been collected without information about their owners or use, and despite their abundance they have not been exhibited, since they have not been considered valuable from the artistic or functional viewpoint. In contrast to anonymous ladles from the collection, some were collected specifically for the exhibition, attributed character (“beautiful ladle”, “bad ladle”), and exhibited with the owners’ stories about their use. Most ladle “biographies” are about contemporary plastic items, telling a variety of stories about the social life of things in contemporary society. For instance, a person recalls how she used a white ladle during a hiking trip to Bulgaria in 2005 and later on it served in her kitchen:

“At that time, a white ladle made its way into my backpack – it was first used to serve tea or coffee from the cauldron in the mornings and evenings; after that, everyone also received a ladleful or two of food (porridge in the morning, rice or pasta in the evening). After the trip, I used it at home, but soon it obtained an ugly brown colour from blueberry kissel, and I always cast rather weary glances at it, although I kept on using it. You cannot just throw away a wholly intact thing, even if it looks permanently dirty.” (text at the exhibition)

In contrast to the contemporary story, visitors can watch an ethnographic film from 1934, “The dance of wedding cooks”, showing the cooks from Ruhnu Island dancing with ladles - central objects in the ceremony, thus contrasting active practices with their “sleep” on the museum shelves.

To sum up, the pantries and cupboards at museums work not only as elements for reconstructing authentic milieus, but they also convey sensory and emotional experiences. The assemblages of dishes, kitchen tins, and ladles can be perceived as compositions of aesthetic objects, but they may also evoke nostalgia or curiosity

through their familiar visual forms and personal narratives told to the visitor. By the example of these sets of objects at exhibitions the museums demonstrated that ordinary tableware or cooking tools become valuable “because they have been removed from the stream of commodities and have acquired an almost totemic personal and family history”, passed down from one generation to the next. This way they may become vehicles of (shared) memories that help to tell stories of people’s lives (cf. Sutton and Hernandez 2007).

Conclusions

The kitchen exhibitions at four Estonian museums in 2015–2016 presented a unique opportunity to examine interpretations and representations of everyday materiality in a comparative manner. Such a comparative analysis allows us to argue that these exhibitions reflected a shift in approaches to material culture and everyday practices inspired by new theoretical developments in museum studies. The main ideas expressed at the exhibitions were related to biographical and narrative approach, objects that evoke memories. The very materiality of kitchen objects proved to be continuously relevant after the digital turn, for both actions and interactions, for evoking multiple practices related to kitchen ecology, although the sensory and participatory potential was not fully used.

Kitchens were interpreted as lived spaces in which objects, ideas, and practices are intertwined and revealed through ethnographic inquiry – personal stories or collective narratives of the period. Changes in historical milieus were clearly marked, but, unlike museum representations following the reconstructive principle, the dynamics of kitchens was shown through changes both in object forms and practices. At all the exhibitions, the social life of things was evoked, although through different angles. While the EAADM and the EOAM aimed towards shedding light on the general and typical, the HM and the ENM paid more attention to the individual choices and subjective experiences through the biographical approach. The latter enabled the museums to acti-

vate visitors’ interest through nostalgia and thus objects became anchors or stimulators of remembering. At the EAADM the perspective of usage remained more implicit in contrast with the design practices, yet mass-produced design objects clearly activated personal memories. At the HM the practices were highlighted through personal stories of the “housewives”, but also by similar objects carrying out the same function at different points in time.

It became evident that the kitchen as a topic was especially well suited to test new ways of representing a specific *lived space* at museums. In order to mediate the sensory aspects of kitchen materiality, demonstrations of practices or participatory activities were used. This was most explicit in the case of living history approach at the EOAM, where the recreation of historical domestic spaces supported cooking or other events, and omnipresent hostesses added to the feeling of homeliness. At the HM organic kitchen-scapes of various eras were created and the interactive visitor experience was encouraged, which enabled sensing and feeling the materiality in a very intimate manner. The ENM made it possible for the visitor to take a closer look at and listen to the sounds of the contemporary professional and domestic cooking, eating, and shopping through videos and photographs. The exhibition “We cook” also made a step towards representing the kitchen as a contested space, in which power relations are negotiated not just in terms of gender but also in terms of tradition and innovation, professional and everyday cooking. Although the kitchen as a topic for museum exhibitions enables to highlight multiple sensory aspects of material culture, all the kitchen exhibitions also exposed their limits in offering the visitors sensory experiences due to the particular museum buildings and restrictions on touching, cooking or eating imposed by the exhibition spaces. Furthermore, it was likewise expressed in interviews with the museum personnel that offering the visitor special programmes and multisensory experiences puts considerable pressure on the curators and caretakers, and therefore may not be sustainable in a longer perspective or requires additional personnel and funding.

Museum theoreticians have argued for a diversity of interpretations and involvement of the audiences at different stages of museum work: collecting, exhibiting, and interpreting. Thereby, the museum becomes a space “not just for dialogue between the museum and its audiences, but rather a space for discussions and interactions” (Runnel and Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2014, 12–15). Considering the museums studied, exhibiting lived kitchens required great effort from the curators. In all the cases, they could not rely on the existing collections, but special participatory actions were used to borrow or collect objects or sets of objects and stories of things or people using these things for the exhibitions. However, it was not possible to keep all the items exhibited in the collections due to space constraints and in the case of the HM and the EAADM a large part of the exhibits were returned to the original owners after the end of the exhibitions. In the future, involvement of the public (including donators of the objects) into the process of interpretation could be more active.

While each of the exhibitions had a clear profile, altogether they gave a cumulative effect, outlining the unique (and exceptional, compared to

Western Europe) history of Estonian kitchens and the challenges and dilemmas of contemporary consumer society as reflected in and through domestic materiality. Except the EOAM, all the other kitchen exhibitions were one-time projects. Although all of them enjoyed great success among the visitors, this has raised more general issues concerning the collecting and exhibiting of modern material culture originating in 20th century everyday life. Lack of storage space, excessive collections in some areas and major gaps in others call for a closer coordination of collection policies and exhibition strategies.

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NOTES

- 1 The reputation of material culture as an object of study reflects shifts in research paradigms of the discipline, although national traditions have varied here due to epistemological as well as socio-political reasons. In Scandinavian ethnology material culture studies were revived in the 1980s, within the study of consumption as a culture-making process related to identity formation often using a semiotic framework of analysis (Löfgren 2012, 172).
- 2 For example, the exhibition “Counter Space. Design + the Modern Kitchen” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2010–2011: https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/counter_space. Accessed: 05.10.2017.
- 3 For example, the World of Kitchen in Hannover: <http://www.wok-museum.de/>. Accessed: 05.10.2017.
- 4 For example, the Seto Farm Museum, the Mihkli Farm Museum in Saaremaa, and the C.R. Jakobson’s Farm Museum in Pärnu County.
- 5 The Estonian National Museum and the Estonian Museum of Applied Arts and Design are state museums,

and the Estonian Open Air Museum and the Hiiu-
maa Museum work as state foundations.

In the following text abbreviations are used as follows: EOAM = Estonian Open-Air Museum, ENM = Estonian National Museum, HM = Hiiu-
maa Museum, EAADM = Estonian Applied Arts and Design Museum.

- 6 For example, in a documentation project at the Hiiu-
maa Museum schoolchildren were asked to take photographs of cooking at their home. In most cases the results were carefully “staged” with the cooks wearing plastic gloves and impeccably clean aprons.
- 7 The exhibitions “Things in my life” at the Estonian National Museum and the Estonian Applied Art and Design Museum in 2000–2001, and “We eat and drink. Food culture in Soviet Estonia” at the Estonian National Museum and the Estonian Applied Arts and Design Museum in 2006.
- 8 Designed by international architectural bureau Dorell. Ghotmeh. Tane, the 34,000 m² museum is the largest in the Baltic States, with the total exhibition area of 6,136 m².

- 9 Museum Night at the EAADM in 2016; the Bread Day at the EOAM in 2015.
- 10 This created an association with the artist's former photographic exhibition from 2012, titled "Women take little space", which depicted Estonian women working

in small spaces, ironically illustrating the chauvinist claim that women can be paid less than men because their needs are smaller. Liina Siib. "Women take little space". See: <http://liinasiib.com/women-take-little-space/> Accessed: 05.10.2017.

SOURCES

Source material

- HP = Interview with Helgi Põllo at the Hiiumaa Museum, May 19, 2016.
- KK = Interview with Kauri Kiivramees at the Hiiumaa Museum, May 20, 2016.
- MT, DI, BS = Interview with Maret Tamjärv, Dagmar Ingi, and Birgit Salumäe at the Estonian Open-Air Museum, June 28, 2016.
- EN = Interview with Elvi Nassar at the Estonian Open-Air Museum, August 25, 2016.
- KL = Interview with Kai Lobjakas at the Estonian Applied Arts and Design Museum, August 26, 2016.
- PR = Interview with Pille Runnel at the Estonian National Museum, September 16, 2016.

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