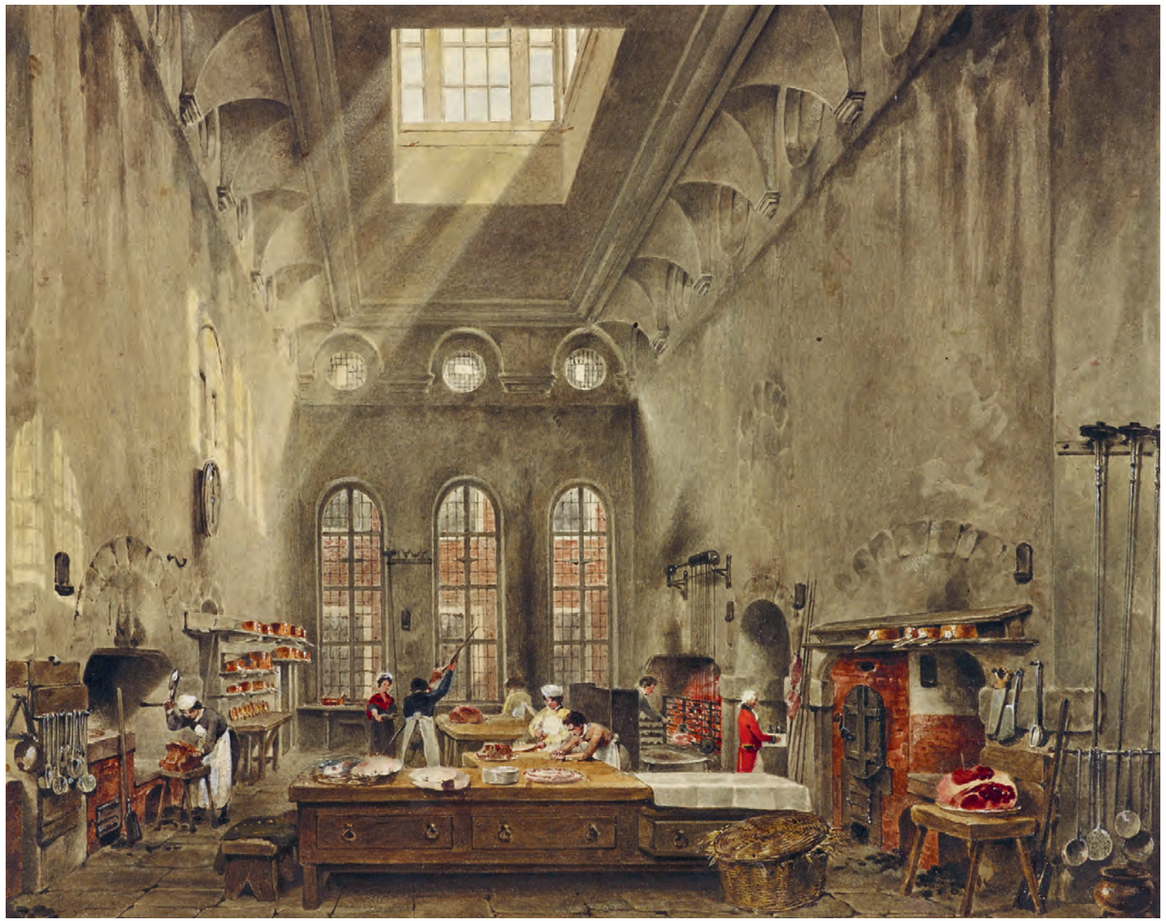
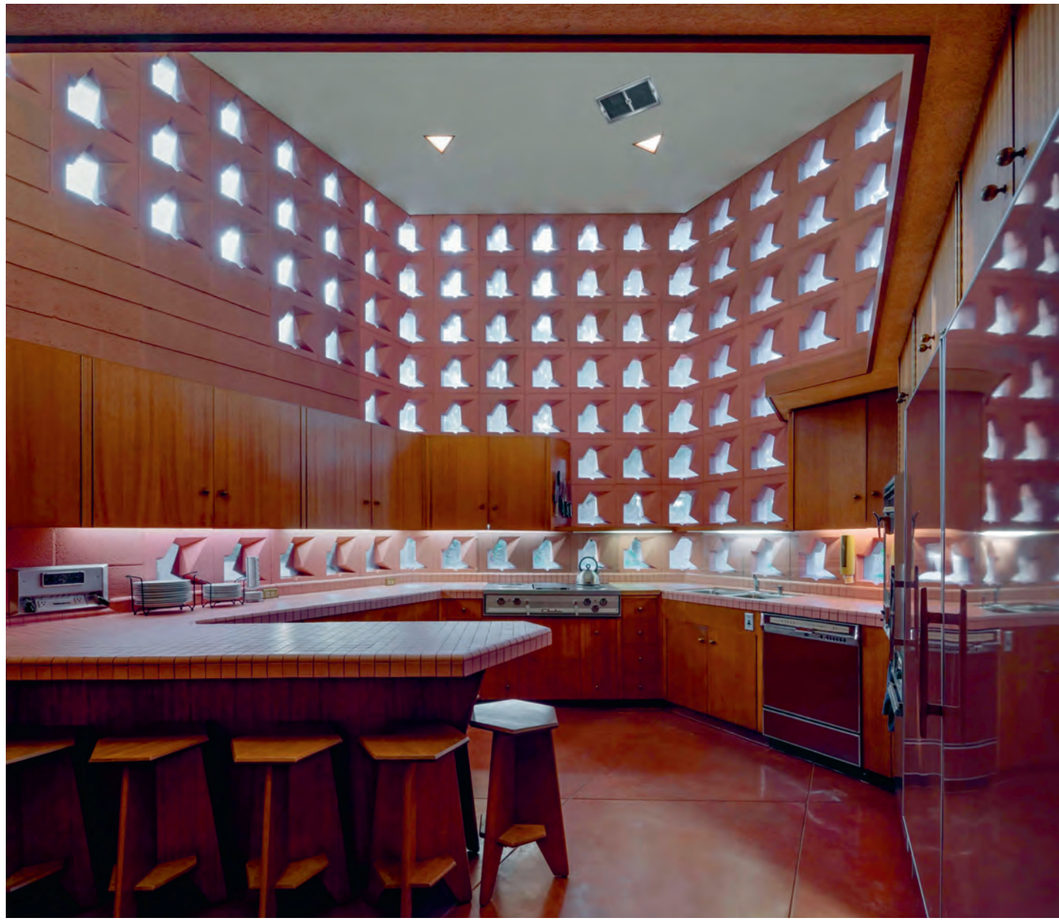
island life

The kitchen may now be the heart of the home, but that wasn't always the case. It took a single architectural intervention – the island – for that transformation to happen.



[left] English architect Sir John Vanbrugh was commissioned to build a kitchen block at London's St James's Palace for the household of George, Prince of Wales in 1717. Depicting it in use, this watercolour was prepared by James Stephanoff for a plate in William Henry Pyne's The History of the Royal Residences (1819).



[right] In Bakersfield, California, you'll find Frank Lloyd Wright's Ablin House, designed in 1958 and completed in 1961 for the family of Dr George and Millie Ablin. Its distinctive terracotta-hued kitchen is complete with an L-shaped island. Photo: Andrew Pielage Photography

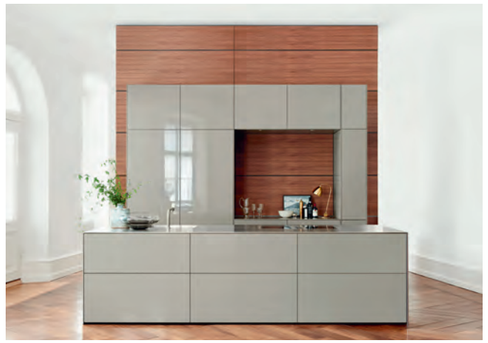
Lively collaboration

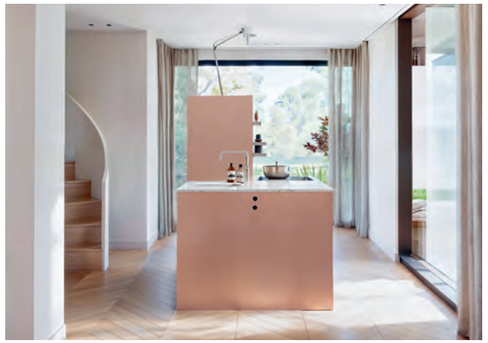
Once relegated to the 'back of house', it took centuries for the kitchen to emerge from the margins of our abode to its centre. Before the 1930s, upper-class homes saw cooking and cleaning as tasks reserved for household staff, and for those in lower economic positions, cramped quarters meant there was not much choice in where these activities happened. In any case, culinary theatre was not something to put on display. Eventually, though, domestic service declined, the home economics field grew, and people began to see that preparing meals in isolation wasn't beneficial to family life.

Towards the middle of the 20th century, modernism was fast reshaping life at home, and social change saw the kitchen as ripe for transformation. "Of recent years, we have begun to realise that the kitchen is a workshop and a laboratory," wrote *Thelma M. Burrows* in *Successful Home Furnishing*, an American guide published in 1938. "It should be scientifically planned for conservation of energy. It should also be beautiful and cheerful." Born in response to mandates like these, the kitchen island would turn humdrum chores into lively collaboration.

Wooden work tables

Nowadays, islands conjure up the image of sprawling suburban kitchens. Yet their origins are much more modest: they are the direct descendants of wooden work tables, where people would peel potatoes, knead dough, clear crumbs, and share news of the day together. While there isn't a single person widely credited for inventing the kitchen island, *Frank Lloyd*





Kitchen islands are the direct descendants of wooden work tables, where people would peel potatoes and knead dough.

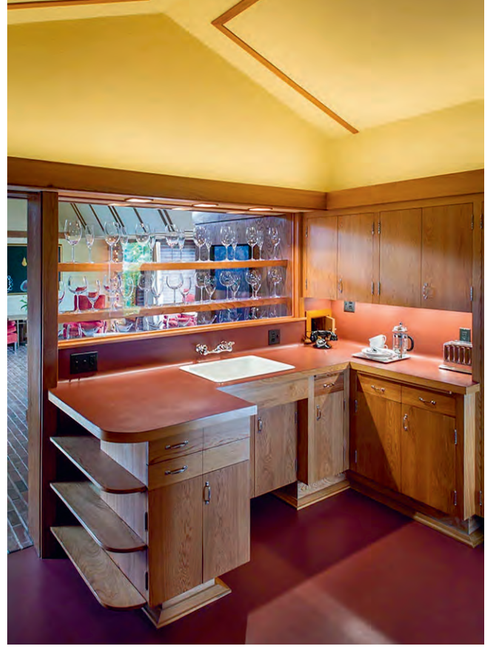
[right] Tables have long played a role as makeshift kitchen ‘islands’. Here, psychiatric nurses receive preliminary training around one at Amsterdam’s Wilhelmina House in 1905. Photo: Amsterdam City Archives

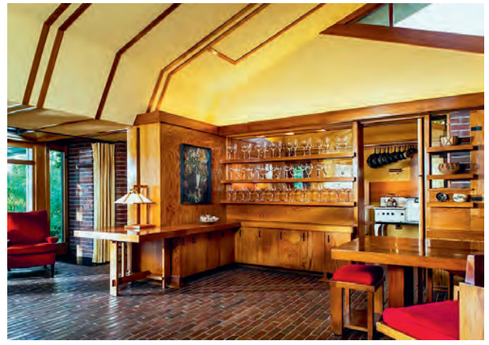
[top left] Tailor-made for the needs of each client, Bulthaup’s Monoblock island – an add-on to its B3 system – designates plenty of space for preparing and cooking food with others.

[top right] Publicised as the “world’s smallest kitchen island”, SieMatic’s 120 by 120 cm worktable, conceived by Marcel Schepers, was realised in collaboration with Miele, Quooker, Jetstone, and Alea.

Wright helped pioneer the idea as a continuation of his open kitchen concepts. The architect realised that the new middle-class reality called for the merging of living and dining areas – a Minneapolis house Wright designed for *Nancy* and *Malcolm Willey* in 1934 is the first with open sightlines between them. It was something very unusual for the time, and an indication of the direction he would take with later kitchens, many of which would have islands.

Today, a kitchen island can be yours for €349 with a quick IKEA order. They can also be custom-made for a space and fitted with the latest appliances and finest materials, as is the offer from brands like Bulthaup and SieMatic. This range reflects the kitchen’s status as the social capital of any home, from urban studios to expansive farmhouses. Aiming to demonstrate that islands can work at any scale, *Marcel Schepers* developed one for SieMatic measuring only 1.2 x 1.2 metres. As the kitchen manufacturer’s long-time showroom designer, his goal was to prove that islands still have utility, even as living becomes more compact amid housing pressures.





[left] The open kitchen in Nancy and Malcolm Willey’s Minneapolis home by Frank Lloyd Wright (1934) was unusual for its time – it allowed Nancy to prepare and serve food while also entertaining guests.

Minimum footprint

The idea of dedicating precious floor area to an island may seem counterintuitive in this reality. However, *Perry Hanssen* – whose studio, Hanssen Interior Design, has taken over Schepers’s role since the designer’s retirement – has successfully incorporated them in apartments where homeowners are ‘happy to have a kitchen of maybe two metres’. Mobile and modular, the designs can function against a wall or cabinetry when space is tight, becoming peninsulas rather than true islands, or stand alone in larger kitchens. Their modularity means they adapt to the space available rather than demanding a minimum footprint. He recalls advice from Schepers: “You need a chopping board to prepare, water to clean, and a stove to cook. That’s it – all the rest is extra.”

Where the original concept was focused on stripping things to that functional essence, Hanssen and his team are extending the thinking by prioritising connection, personalising each cube to a client’s lifestyle. For some it may serve as an after-hours wine bar, for others a quick meeting station. “Just like food, this piece of furniture connects us,” he continues. “Looking at kitchens as pieces of new design furniture – like a cabinet or sofa – you can design these spaces in a different way.”

From Wright’s revolutionary open kitchens to SieMatic’s micro-cubes, kitchen islands have remained true to their original purpose: bringing people together around the work of daily life. While at times no more than simple timber blocks, they carve out vital space for efficiency and camaraderie. [LMJ]