incident to make her point, leaving the reader to wonder what else has been omitted for the sake of her arguments.

De Jean has limited herself to a brief, albeit influential, era. At times she stretches to make connections to Louis XIV, and too often her points are strained. The book serves best not as a definitive guide to one glorious era in French history but as a starting point from which to begin the journey.

—James Reford, New York, NY

The Making of the Modern Kitchen: A Cultural History
June Freeman
Oxford: Berg, 2004
v + 205 pp. Illustrations. $25.05 (paper)

The critical territory that The Making of the Modern Kitchen: A Cultural History claims with its title is as compelling as it is worrisome. How can a relatively slim book provide “a cultural history” of such a vital and underexplored domestic space? We discover in the first sentence that the survey is in fact limited by nation: “The idea of the kitchen exerts a powerful hold on the English imagination” (p.1, author’s emphasis). And by the third page the title’s assertion of a “history” is qualified: “the book will not aim to provide a detailed history of kitchens or kitchen design” (p.3). Freeman does provide a brief survey of the modern “fitted,” or built-in, kitchen. But the author is a sociologist, and her approach, while incorporating interdisciplinary concerns, is firmly based in the social sciences. Rather than objects, the people who use them are the subject, and voice, of this book. Even more specifically, these voices come from a sample of seventy-four British households where new kitchens have been recently installed. The Making of the Modern Kitchen is, therefore, a title that needs to be read almost literally; instead of a historical evolution, the book offers the stories of real people, in the present time, making their own modern kitchens.

The agency given to the consumer is undoubtedly the book’s most significant contribution. There is no “general population” or “average buyer” in Freeman’s study. She does not take for granted the stereotype that women do the purchasing while men control the purse strings. According to her research, couples undertaking kitchen renovations were often both involved, although the women did tend to have a greater influence over aesthetic decisions and the men over financial ones. Kitchens were overwhelmingly created by their owners through a piecemeal process—ads and showrooms might be consulted, but they were never relied upon as the sole source for renovation. Interviewees rejected as much as they accepted, aiming to create a space for living as much as cooking, a space that, Freeman claims, would express their “values, hopes and goals” (p.124).

Herein lies the book’s central problem: how does one define terms like “values,” “taste,” and “fashion,” and how are these concepts formed? In her desire to allow the consumer a maximum degree of individuality, Freeman fails to consider seriously the myriad factors that shape such aesthetic and moral preferences. There are several halting pages on Bourdieu and postmodernism that seem more like interruptions than illuminating theorizations. What is missing is not further philosophical conceptualization but a more rigorous and specific discussion of the consumer in terms of the world of objects, advertising, and consumer culture. It is fascinating that 86 percent of respondents denied that fashion had anything to do with their choice of kitchen furnishings, but how do they define fashion? What is it—and what is it not—in terms of structure, color, or materials? One respondent declared that she would read the text of an advertisement if she liked the picture but would skip it if she didn’t. Freeman uses this response to question the validity of “academic analyses of the language of advertising” (p.93), but the fact remains that this woman looked at the picture regardless of her level of engagement with the ad copy. The woman had made a choice based on visual cues.

Whether or not one is “making” a kitchen, one faces such visual information constantly—in print and television ads, in catalogs, on any TV program or movie whose set includes a kitchen, on shows focused on home renovation, and in sprawling do-it-yourself home-improvement stores, design showrooms, and specialty boutiques. Creating a kitchen is not the result of easy manipulation of purchaser by salesperson, as Freeman helpfully reemphasizes. But negotiating the nearly endless array of choices cannot occur in a sensory vacuum. “Values” do not emerge from the ether; they are formed, shaped, and changed by being in a world of objects.

Design histories are too often written as if the designers and architects are the deities of this world, passing down proclamations in the form of three-dimensional things. Freeman’s book counters this approach with a different one: she listens. The result is a useful contribution to the story of the modern kitchen. Yet this is a story as much about looking as it is about listening, and that history remains to be written.

—Jennifer Raab, Yale University