

HOW COULD SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION BECOME NORMAL?



ESRC SUSTAINABLE TECHNOLOGIES PROGRAMME

summary

Homes are where we consume a growing amount of energy, water and other natural resources. And new domestic technologies play an important role in shaping how we behave and what we take for granted in daily life at home. In use, new technologies open up new possibilities for consumption, often with negative environmental consequences. For example, the microwave has largely become a device for de-frosting, which has contributed to the growing demand for frozen food; this in turn is highly energy intensive in its production, distribution and storage.

Focusing on the design and use of kitchens and bathrooms in the UK over the last few decades, this project will investigate how technologies have influenced the consumption of critical environmental resources. It will examine how the daily life and expectations of different groups of people have been affected by new technologies, and whether consumption could be modified to become more sustainable in the future.

SUSTAINABLE DOMESTIC TECHNOLOGIES

A third of all UK energy is consumed in homes. At home food is turned into meals; dirty dishes, clothes and bodies become clean; and cosy, comfortable settings are created. From an environmental perspective, the most significant forms of resource consumption take place in two places: the kitchen and bathroom. Within them, domestic



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appliances have become necessary through their time and labour-saving functions.

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In both kitchens and bathrooms, radical but often invisible changes have occurred in the ways people behave. For example, domestic laundry has increased five fold over the last century, and people in Britain are showering more than ever before. While technological innovation can reduce the resources consumed by individual appliances, it has also fuelled escalating standards and expectations of service.

The ESRC Sustainable Technologies Programme funds research in UK universities and institutes on the innovation, spread and use of novel technologies that can enable transitions to sustainability. The Programme seeks to analyse what makes technologies sustainable, to assess the roles technological and behavioural change can play in achieving more sustainable futures, and to reveal the social and economic processes that foster or inhibit innovation for sustainable development. STP is a five-year £3 million programme launched in January 2002. It is an integral part of the broader Sustainable Technologies Initiative.

The objectives for the Sustainable Technologies Programme are:

To identify and explain the social and economic forces that shape, foster and inhibit sustainable technologies

To develop concepts to underpin research and development of more sustainable technologies

To evaluate policy options and influence policy to promote major improvements in resource productivity

To support social science contributions to the objectives of the Sustainable Technologies Initiative

To develop trans-disciplinary research capacity on innovation and the environment in the UK.

For example, 'cold' appliances (fridges and freezers), dishwashers, tumble dryers and washing machines accounted for nearly 30% of UK household energy consumption in 1999, while water consumption in the home has increased by 70% over the last thirty years. In many cases, household technologies have the effect of binding their users into extensive complexes of service provision.

This research will explore how domestic appliances - especially washing machines, dishwashers, freezers and power showers - become 'normal'. The historical development of kitchens and bathrooms is being investigated to see how technologies make their way into homes and into routine - yet resource-intensive - use.

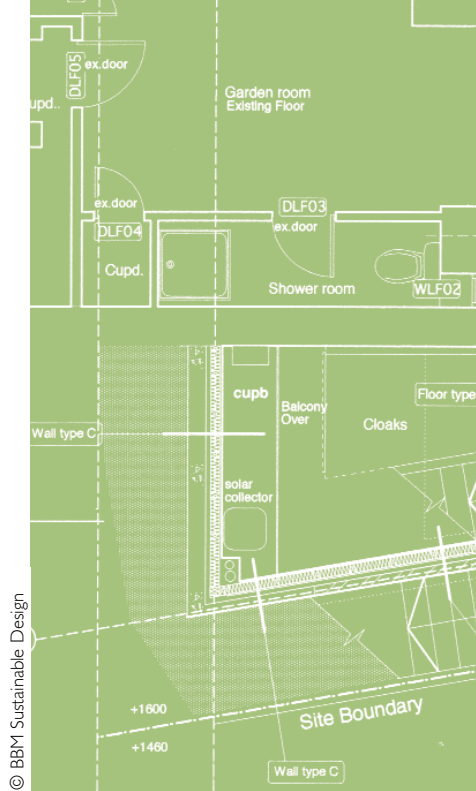
KEY QUESTIONS

The following key questions will be explored:

- How do behaviour, technology, and beliefs and values co-evolve in kitchens and bathrooms?
- How does what's taken for granted change?
- How do new technologies affect what we take to be necessary and normal?
- How are standardised technologies taken up in practice?

APPROACH

A focus for the research is the relationship between different appliances, such as tumble-dryers and washing machines, and microwaves and freezers, and how this affects the ways people organise and manage their domestic lives. The introduction of domestic appliances will be examined by reviewing historical documentary material such as magazines and manufacturer's brochures. This will be accompanied by analysis of diffusion patterns of different domestic technologies amongst different social groups.



The research will underpin more realistic policies for reducing the resource intensity of everyday life

Interviews will be conducted with people living in three types of housing: terraced, semi-detached and modern. The type of housing is important because this presents constraints on kitchen and bathroom use. Further interviews will be conducted with the producers of domestic technologies and of kitchens and bathrooms to gain insight into the innovation and marketing of domestic technologies and their anticipation of future developments.

OUTCOMES

The research will improve our understanding of the role of the consumer in innovation and explore how appliances that bring benefits can also reinforce unsustainable ways of life. Improved knowledge of consumer behaviour and of how domestic technologies come to be accepted and used is important in re-thinking consumer practices in more sustainable directions. This will underpin more realistic policies for reducing the resource intensity of everyday life.

Outputs of the project will be discussed and published through workshops, seminars and an international conference.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The 'Sustainable Domestic Technologies: Changing Practice, Technology & Convention' project will run from January 2003 until December 2004. For more information contact:

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STP is part of the Sustainable Technologies Initiative. The STI website has further details:
www.oakdenhollins.co.uk/sti.html