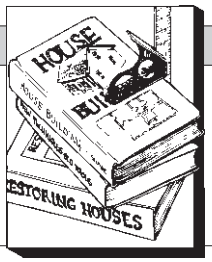

A Sense of Home

Home by Witold Rybcsynski. Penguin Viking Books, P.O. Box 999, Bergenfield, NJ 07621; 244 pages; $7.95, paperback.

In designing a house—one would think—a knowledge of our past, that is, how we got where we are today, would be useful. Yet it seems many homebuilders rely either on "cookie-cutter" designs, or on ill-conceived interpretations of past styles. *Home*, by Canadian architect Witold Rybczynski, provides a well researched, informative, readable, and sometimes critical account of where we began and how we have arrived in the modern period.

Ostensibly Rybczynski is discussing building interiors, but his real topic is *comfort*—and how to achieve it. His subjects range from the popularity of "stylist" Ralph Lauren's creations, to the exceptionally narrow Dutch houses of the 17th century, to the failings of modern chair design, and a thumbnail tour of art history.

Rybczynski's begins with *nostalgia*. Why, he asks, are Lauren's fabric and interior designs (with names like "Log Cabin" and "New England") so popular? What images do his designs evoke in people's minds? And what do we seek in stylistic nostalgia?

The answer is long, and as my 8-year-old son says, "complexicated." It begins with a look at Albrecht Durer's etching, *Saint Jerome in His Study* (Complete with tame lion), and a brief etymology of the word *comfort*—first used to mean "domestic amenity" in the 18th century, according to the author.

The word *home* also gets analyzed. The "bare existence" lived by medieval European serfs in their hovels made a term like *home* absurd for them, says Rybczynski. However, life in the more densely populated walled towns of the time, where the emerging middle class often lived and worked in the same structure with their servants, began to change people's notions about this place we call "home." Here chairs began to emerge—stiff, upright, formal, and used only by "important" people. Everyone else sat on benches or stools. The concept of "comfort" began to take on dimension. Privacy, however, was still virtually nonexistent.

Later decades brought changes in fireplace technology, window glass, and the popularity (and decline) of public baths (private baths still did not exist). Meanwhile, in the mansions of the French aristocracy, offset doors gave a measure of visual privacy, and rooms with differentiated functions were making an appearance. In 17th-century Norway, stove innovation further encouraged sub-division of space, which in turn fostered more intimacy between people, says Rybczynski, while at the same time, children who once were sent away at an early age to apprenticeships, were being kept at home. Servants now slept separately from family members, rather than having sleeping segregated solely by gender, as in the past. The idea of a home as a seat of family life was slowly entering human consciousness as a result of combined sociological and technological changes.

Narrow Dutch houses saw the creation of larger windows (perhaps to accommodate the incredibly low light levels one encounters in the Netherlands), curtains to aid privacy, private back gardens, and most importantly, say Rybczynski, the "feminization" of the home as Dutch women (even those with domestic help)did much of their own housework.

Moving ahead, Rybczynski informs us about the ergonomics of chair design, the continued differentiation or room functions in Baroque France and the pastoral manors of England—including development of the hall (today's foyer), the drawing room (a place for more informal family life and the feminine precursor of our family room), separate children's wings, freeform plans (as opposed to a formal classical layout), and the birth of bedrooms for each occupant (that is, "my" room).

The Colonial through Victorian periods witnessed the rise of "upholsterers" (interior decorators) in competition with architects (who, Rybczynski says, were "then, as they are now, interested more in the appearance of buildings than in their functioning"), and many technological advances. The latter included gas and kerosene lights and the Rumford fireplace, and culminated in a *virtually* obsession by the Victorians with the engineering of light and fresh air.

Close on the heals of technological developments was the study of efficiency—both environmental and human. The advent of electricity brought mechanical poser to individual homes for the first time in history. Appliances proliferated. the number of household servants began to decline. And women such as Christie Frederick began to apply the methods of industrial efficiency experts to domestic work and house planning—making an enormous contribution still felt in today's houses, Shrinking houses put the squeeze (so to speak) on "grand" interior styles where form followed *tradition*, not *function*.

As humans entered the 20th century, the search for a new style created Art Nouveau, ARt Deco, and the "machine for living" concept of Swiss/French architect Le Corbusier—all of which ignored, or at least subordinated, questions of efficiency in planning and layout. Concurrently "modern" chairs were designed by architects such as Marcel Breuer and Mies van dor Rohe to fit into their new, stripped-down interiors. Sadly, these were not always suited to comfort, and Rybczynski quotes the eminent Philip Johnson as once telling a group of students, "I think that comfort is a function of whether you think a chair is good-looking or not." At the same time, says Rybczynski, "What's new?" was more frequently asked by designers at all levels than "What's better?" The result, he adds, was an unwillingness to gradually modify designs—based upon a fear that adapting a previous work (your own or someone else's would imply a lack of imagination. Even today's post-modernists, says Rybczynski, are mostly interested in "obscure" architectural history, and are "almost never *anti*modern" (my emphasis).

All of this is very interesting, you might say, but what about comfort? Have we lost sight of the original question? The final chapter of *Home* returns to this issue. "Comfort," says Rybczynski, is like an onion, having many layers. These draw upon physiology (feeling good), subjective experience (satisfaction), the influence of social norms, scientific comfort studies, and a balance between intimacy and privacy—none of which are by themselves sufficient. The concept of comfort, the author argues, includes elements of convenience, efficiency, "domesticity," physical ease, and other aspects—and means different things at different times. To paraphrase the late Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas' definition of pornography, I suppose that having read Rybczynski's book, you might conclude, "I can't define *comfort*, but I know it when I see it."

This book won't tell you *how* to plan a house, but it will give you a valuable historical perspective and present you with many insights as to what will make your clients' houses truly personal and comfortable *homes*. Moreover, Rybczynski is a good and entertaining writer, which is a virtue in itself. The only thing I missed in this book was more illustrations to show me many of the things discussed in the text that aroused my curiosity.

The Global View

Dwellings: The House Across the World by Paul Oliver. University of Texas Press, P.O. Box 7819, Austin, TX 78713; 1987; 248 pages; $34.95, hardcover.

If Witold Rybczynski's *Home* provides a historical background for today's houses, *Dwellings* by Oxford architect Paul Oliver furnishes a cultural and anthropological perspective, but in a much drier, more scholarly fashion. Oliver's 10-page bibliography, with titles such as, "Field Notes on the Culture of Vaitupu" or "Spatial and Temporal Processes in Northwest Amazonia" are indicative of his approach to understanding "the house

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Let The Sun Shine In!: *Sources of Solar and Energy-Efficient House Plans*, is available from the U.S. Department of Energy, Conservation and Renewable Energy Inquiry and Referral Service, free of charge. This 3-page listing includes brief descriptions of plan books and periodicals on energy-efficient house design, and publisher addresses for each. To order, write to CAREIRS, P.O. Box 8900, Silver Spring, MD 20907; 800/523-2929.

Parking It: *Garages and Carports* is an 8-page circular from the University of Illinois, Small Homes Council-Building Research Council, which looks at considerations when building garages and/or carports. Site planning, design (including the driveway), and actual construction details, such as windows, electricity, and heating, are covered. To obtain a copy, send $1 to the Small Homes Council-Building Research Council, University of Illinois, 1 E. St. Mary's Road, Champaign, IL 61820; 217/333-0358.

Breathe Easy: *Indoor Air Quality and Your Health* is a 13-page free booklet providing information about various kinds of indoor air pollutants, how to determine the quality of air in a given home, and ways of improving the air quality inside a house. The booklet starts off with a questionnaire for determining the existence of air pollutants and ends with a listing of organizations which inform, advise, and test on the subject of indoor air quality. To order, write to Indoor Air Quality And Your Health Booklet, c/o Clark Mailing Service, Inc., 1 Jackson St., Worcester, MA 01608.

Planning To Save: A guidebook titled *The House as a System*, is published by Northeast Utilities as part of their Energy Value Home Program. This 41-page book looks at designing a home or addition with efficient energy use in mind. Systems within the entire home are covered, including insulation, roof systems, windows and doors, and foundations and floors. Energy-related issues relevant to each system, such as moisture protection, ventilation, air leakage, weatherization, and heating and cooling systems are discussed. An appendix with other resources on the subject concludes the guide. To order a free copy, write to EVH, Dept. JLC, C & LM, P.O. Box 3001, Wallingford, CT 06491-3001; 203/721-2715.

Concepts In Cleaning: A 16-page brochure on laundry facilities for apartment complexes is available from Web Service Company. The *Laundry Room Concept, Planning, and Design Guide* covers laundry room planning, and requirements and specifications, including gas, electrical, plumbing, venting, and make-up air. Two sample layouts are also provided. To order a free copy, contact Sales and Marketing, Dept. G., Web Service Company, Inc., 3690 Freeman Blvd., Redondo Beach, CA 90278; 800/421-6897.

"Print" Products: The *Product Catalog*, by Keuffel & Esser Company, lists products of interest to architects, designers, and any others who work with drawings. Each product group description is accompanied by specifications and applications for that group. For information on ordering this catalog from a regional dealer, write to Keuffel & Esser Company, Box 800, Ford Road, Rockaway, NJ 07866, or call 201/625-9005. ■

across the world." Not that the book reads like a Master's thesis—it doesn't, but an interest in Third World cultural anthropology is an asset to the reader.

Oliver begins—and ends—with an analysis of the traditional arctic *iglu* and its decline in the face of "modern" culture. Along the way he addresses the indigenous shelters of desert nomads (e.g. the lovely "humpback" tents of the Bedouin), rural settlements from Ireland to Africa, the surviving medieval town of Provins, France, flood plain houses, contemporary European and Chinese cave dwellings (very cozy), Amer-Indian *pueblos*, and many other housing forms. In each case he tries to show how ecological, spatial, demographic, economic, and climatic factors, along with native skills and technology, have determined the form, style, decoration, and planning of the world's dwellings.

A final chapter considers housing the homeless—discussing the pitfalls of disaster relief efforts (time delays, cost, transport, and the potential unsuitability of the housing units to local climate and culture). Oliver also discusses the so-called "Sites & Services" programs for the vast squatter settlements outside some large cities in India and Latin America, efforts of Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy and the Gandhian English architect Laurie Baker to adapt traditional building methods to contemporary problems, and aided self-help projects in Sri Lanka.

Dwellings is of most interest to readers specializing in global housing issues, or to libraries where the "average" reader can gain a broader perspective on house design and construction. Illustrated with drawings, with both black and white, and color photos.—*Paul Hanke*