

**Rybczynski, Witold. *Home: A Short History of an Idea.*  
Markham, Ontario: Viking Penguin Books, 1986. Pp.256. Black  
and white photographs. \$9.95 paper**

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Volume 17, numéro 1, juin 1988

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1017704ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017704ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Krushnelnicki, B. (1988). Compte rendu de [Rybczynski, Witold. *Home: A Short History of an Idea.* Markham, Ontario: Viking Penguin Books, 1986. Pp.256. Black and white photographs. \$9.95 paper]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 17(1), 48–49. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017704ar>

unable or unwilling to conform were left to their own devices.

In contrast to *A Sporting Time*, Rob Ruck's *Sandlot Seasons* examines the important social role of sport (especially baseball) to Pittsburgh's black community. Ruck, like Adelman, has a partisan commitment to a specific historiographical tradition. In response to books such as *Beyond the Melting Pot* and Stanley Elkin's *Slavery*, historians of the Afro-American experience have attempted to show that black Americans possessed a unique cultural experience. Ruck extends this to sport. Sport was not merely a ticket out of the black ghetto, it was a positive element that channeled social behavior into constructive and meaningful experiences. It gave the black community its own heroes and provided one of the few opportunities for inter-racial contact on an equal basis. *Sandlot Seasons* portrays black baseball in Pittsburgh as possessing a character not unlike the pre-modern games described by Adelman. It continued to be a local, ritualistic, simple and vague activity almost a century after the era discussed in *A Sporting Season*.

Ruck's book romanticizes, is personal and impressionistic, but is consistent in dealing with the aura surrounding semi-professional baseball and the sport's local heroes. Black baseball survived and even prospered in times of economic depression, extreme racism, and two world wars. Records are sketchy and comparisons with white professional athletes are inconclusive, but the mythology of the sandlot seasons has survived. The shattering of the colour bar in professional baseball signalled the demise of the local, community-centred sandlot teams, such as the Homestead Grays and the Pittsburgh Crawfords. Integrated professional baseball attracted top black athletes and fans, establishing city-wide, rather than community-based support for the game. In the 1950s black baseball was consumed by modernization and with it a key feature of black community identification disappeared.

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, baseball, its players and its administrators had been, according to Ruck, a cohesive element in black Pittsburgh. Although many linked the game to petty crime, it provided a focus for community loyalty. Despite sport's emergence as a middle-class business, Ruck shows that this was not necessary to make baseball socially valuable.

Each of these books contains a disquieting element. *A Sporting Time* is too pat, too homogenized. *Sandlot Seasons* is too sanguine, too romantic. Both, however, are valuable additions to American sport's history. They succeed in affirming the historical importance of leisure and, like baseball itself, they remain loyal to tradition while extending legitimate boundaries.

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**Rybczynski, Witold. *Home: A Short History of an Idea*. Markham, Ontario: Viking Penguin Books, 1986. Pp.256. Black and white photographs. \$9.95 paper.**

What makes a house a home and how did it get this way? These are the questions McGill University architect Witold Rybczynski addresses in his latest book. The answer for Rybczynski is deceptively simple. The home is an idea invented and developed to provide for the growing needs of comfort and other amenities such as domesticity, privacy, intimacy and efficiency.

The discovery and elucidation of these attributes of hominess and how they evolved make a most interesting journey. It begins in the current age with Rybczynski calling to the page images of contemporary culture. He describes the archetypal man of comfort, Ralph Lauren. Lauren is comfortably dressed in Ralph Lauren shirt and pants, comfortably coiffed and smelling of Ralph Lauren cologne

and comfortably housed in a home decorated by none other than Ralph Lauren himself. For Rybczynski, Lauren is not merely a faddish couturier, but a designer who reflects potent bourgeois traditions. His new line of home furnishings has become popular because its design is based on comfortable elegance, rehearsed informality, and polite rusticity, and, most of all, it evokes an idealized sense of the past. Is all this merely nostalgia? What are we missing that makes us willing to pay so dearly and search so diligently for a domestic tradition, Rybczynski asks.

To answer this, Rybczynski examines the evolution of "comfort." Comparing a 16th century writing-room with his own study, he notes that to a casual observer the modern room is far more comfortable. What is important, however, is that if the same comparison were to be made by a 16th century person, one would expect little more than a puzzled stare since the idea of comfort was unknown. On the basis of this illustration Rybczynski concludes that comfort as a measure of domestic amenity is rather recent in origin.

In tracing the roots of the idea of home, Rybczynski turns his attention to the middle ages. During this era, class divisions distinguished by a wide chasm in housing conditions existed in society. The poor, enduring the most wretched conditions of rural feudalism, did little more than camp out, more or less permanently, in hovels. By contrast, the wealthy enjoyed extravagant, if not especially cosy, lodgings. In neither case, however, was there a concept of "home" or "family" as we understand it today. The revival of towns in the 13th and 14th centuries coincided with the emergence of the free bourgeois or middle-class town dwellers. The burgher's town house combined the workplace and business establishment of the artisan and craftsman with the living quarters of the owner's extended family, which often included servants and apprentices. All lived without privacy in one or two large, poorly heated

rooms in which furniture was moved from place to place to accommodate the various daily activities of eating, sleeping, entertaining and working.

Rybczynski describes a typical household in the 17th century and the emergence during that time of the earliest characteristic of a home, privacy. The development of a more "nuclear" family, consisting of a married couple, their children and a few servants, combined with a growing sense of privacy and private intimacy, he argues, led to the more familiar family household. A fundamental change in domestic design followed this evolution, resulting in separate rooms for family members and servants.

In dealing with the next characteristic of "home", the author turns his attention to events in the Netherlands. Dutch laws limiting the hiring of servants resulted in family members assuming increasing responsibility for home maintenance. This presaged the more recent era in North America, when servants for the middle-class became virtually non-existent, their function taken over by over by labour-saving technologies. Invariably, housework became the responsibility of women, for at the same time, according to Rybczynski, the male-dominated workplace became separated from the home. The neat, tidy homes of the Dutch, with their modest dimensions and tasteful, uncluttered ornament, is, for Rybczynski, the bridge between the the middle ages and modern idea of the home. Uncomplicated, but comfortable furniture, low-maintenance decor (because of the lack of servants) and simple appearance reflected two key developments: the feminization of the home and the view of the home as the serene, refuge of comfort and family recreation.

In discussing the evolution of the modern home, one cannot avoid the subject of furniture and appliances. Rybczynski addresses these in chapters that deal with the evolution of domestic decoration and

design and with the development of "home economics" or "domestic engineering."

These changes emerged with the transition between the western European household and the nuclear family of middle-class America, where technical entrepreneurialism combined with a democratic distaste for servants facilitated the development of labour-saving devices and the professionalization of the homemaker.

Furniture design and interior decoration were both influenced by the increasing functionalism and efficiency of the modern home. The "form follows function" adage of Le Corbusier and other modernists brought about the clean, uncluttered lines and smooth curves of Art Deco. The home became an efficient machine, entering the modern era. In his treatment of the "machine age" house Rybczynski comes full circle. In the final chapter, he posits the need for a renewed sense of "bourgeois tradition" in the design of our homes.

While he does not reject modernism, Rybczynski seeks to soften it with a deeper understanding of comfort. To do this he draws from traditions that he might say were too readily abandoned with the coming of the machine age. Many contemporary practices must be questioned and some lost traditions must be adapted to modern life, he argues. For instance, the frugal spaces and simple materials of 17th century Dutch bourgeois homes tell us much about our own small, single-family homes and the style of life in them; and homes of Victorian design are instructive in regard to the provision of privacy and the inclusion of innovation without loss of comfort. (Rybczynski claims that modern trends toward open-concept design provide us with less privacy than any other time since the medieval period.) His argument establishes a middle ground between the uncritical adoption of change and unrealistic attempts to revive the past that are no longer workable. The criterion for accepting a design principle is how much it contributes to human comfort, not whether it

is traditional, modern or post-modern in origin.

*Home : A Short History of an Idea* is an abundantly readable book in the tradition of Lewis Mumford or Jane Jacobs. While it may lack the rigour that follows from the use of original data, preferring instead to pick and choose from secondary sources, its argument is compelling and eloquently made. The author's style is most pleasant and the work is a thought-provoking reinterpretation of history. This is the broad stroke at work.

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Dennis, Richard. *Landlords and Rented Housing in Toronto, 1885-1914*. Toronto: Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto, July 1987. Pp. iv, 57. Maps. \$6.00;

Harris, Richard. *The Growth of Home Ownership in Toronto, 1899-1913*. Toronto: Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto, July 1978. Pp. iv, 35. Maps. \$5.00;

Choko, Marc H. *The Characteristics of Housing Tenure in Montreal*. Toronto: Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto, November 1987. Pp. iv, 31. Maps.

These three papers, based on presentations at a housing tenure workshop sponsored by the Centre for Urban and Community Studies in February 1987, pursue a common discussion. The point of departure is succinctly set out in Harris's paper on the growth of home ownership during the Toronto boom period in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In round numbers, the percentage of owner-occupied housings units in the city increased from slightly more than 25% in the 1890s to nearly 50% by the eve of World War I. Harris and Dennis offer different though not