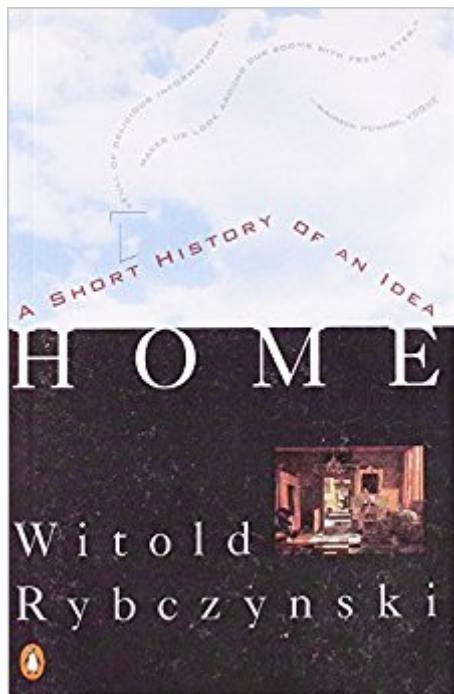


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# Home: A Short History Of An Idea



## **Synopsis**

Walk through five centuries of homes both great and small; from the smoke-filled manor halls of the Middle Ages to today's Ralph Lauren-designed environments; on a house tour like no other, one that delightfully explicates the very idea of "home." You'll see how social and cultural changes influenced styles of decoration and furnishing, learn the connection between wall-hung religious tapestries and wall-to-wall carpeting, discover how some of our most welcome luxuries were born of architectural necessity, and much more. Most of all, *Home* opens a rare window into our private lives; and how we really want to live.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

In this study of the evolution of domestic living, McGill University architecture professor Rybczynski traces the material and cultural influences that have helped shape our notions of comfort. PW recommended this "intriguing" book. Copyright 1987 Reed Business Information, Inc.

In a loosely configured essay, Rybczynski (Architecture, McGill Univ.) discusses the idea of comfort and the Western cultural attitudes that have shaped it since the end of the middle ages. Rather than dealing with the technical aspects of architecture, he reviews such cultural variables as intimacy and privacy, domesticity, ease, and ideas about light, air, and efficiency as they have changed over time. Essentially Rybczynski makes a plea for the primacy of cultural ideals as a basis for creating psychologically comfortable homes. Though he is selective in his history and examples, this is a

worthwhile counterweight to the all-too-common technical practices of modern architects.

Recommended. Jack Perry Brown, Ryerson & Burnham Libs., Art Inst. of Chicago Copyright 1986

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I love this book. I love the topic, analyzing the humble dwellingplace for its universals. I love the way he has organized by those very topics rather than by the detail of historic era or functional object. "Home" liberates the whole topic to a level which allows the reader to consider what all people have in common for their needs and ambitions, and it inspires such optimism for it demonstrates how resourceful people naturally are. The reader feels so much more aware of mindless routines and can delight in the choices of continuing what is habit or deliberately designing a new tradition. For this reason I like using the book with middle school and high school students. It is too long for the time allowed in the school calendar, but it suits a jigsaw approach of different groups of students studying one of the conceptual chapters and applying the insights to their own lives. The reading level is challenging but appropriate if students are not expected to read too much of it in too short a time. This is one of those treasured volumes that suits the purest progressive tradition of education: it is based on authentic experience which helps students find meaning in their real lives here and now, all the while stretching their capacity to see logic in the world. A nice companion to it is "House" by Tracey Kidder for its similarly direct and quiet manner of discussing the decisions people make, alone and collaboratively, to improve their living situation. Like "Cod", this book should be the way students learn history: focused on a recognizable topic and connecting years and years of interaction between people as it describes the everyday personal consequences of innovation and competition. 'Home: a short history of an idea" needs more than five stars, and it needs to be widely available to schoolchildren, perhaps by individual chapter.

"The appearance of [the word] 'comfort' to signify a level of domestic amenity is not documented until the eighteenth century," writes author Witold Rybczynski. That's because, as he explains, until then no word was needed "to articulate an idea that previously had either not existed or had not required expression." The entire book is a historical examination of the evolution of domesticity, starting in the Middle Ages. And for the most part, it's fascinating. What? Were people uncomfortable until the 18th century? How could someone not care about the sense that one's home was a private retreat from the world? Apparently, that question didn't really come up because privacy was unavailable for centuries. As the author explains, "What is unexpected about medieval houses, however, is not the emptiness of furniture ... but the crush and hubbub of life within them." Houses

were meeting places and business environments, and households up to 25 people were not uncommon. "Since all these people lived in one or at most two rooms, privacy was unknown," the author says. It's a long way from that environment to today's expectations, and Rybczynski takes us from the Middle Ages to the precursors of "modern domesticity" in the homes of the 17th century Netherlands (including a new emphasis on furniture) to the evolution of the chair (such as the history of the Windsor chair) to Victorian books on architecture and household layout (I had never before considered the importance of ventilation in homes built for coal heat). I first encountered this book when my husband's woodworking class included it on the Recommended Reading list, and I understand why. Anyone designing furniture is doing it for the user's comfort, which means one needs to understand, "What do we mean by 'comfort' anyway?" If you enjoy books that follow a particular "ingredient" (such as Nathaniel's Nutmeg: Or the True and Incredible Adventures of the Spice Trader Who Changed the Course of History or Kurlansky's Salt: A World History), I expect this book will appeal to you, too. If you had asked me about this book halfway through, I would have insisted that it was five stars. Rybczynski is opinionated, charming, and can make history come alive. But by the end... well, somewhere in there Rybczynski lost me. Maybe it's because he dispenses with my favored Arts & Crafts movement a little too hastily (sniff!). More likely, it was just that he had passed the historical era about which I was most curious (once we got to the 18th century I was pretty ho-hum about it all). I wandered away to other books and had to force myself to finish this. I don't mean to imply that the book is bad in any way; it's just a mix of 3 stars and 5 stars, and I expect its usefulness and fascination will be defined more by your own interest in these times than by his writing. Still, I'm very glad I picked up this book. If you have any interest in home design, architecture, or social evolution, it's worth the purchase price even for the marvelous first two-thirds (and probably the last part, too). It's also worthwhile for anyone who has to think about design in a larger sense, such as software user interface designers: What is it that makes someone feel satisfied with what you created? In other words, I may not love everything about this book, but what I like I REALLY like.

Traces the evolution of the European-influenced home from medieval times to our present age. Rybczynski describes how the home evolved from an uncomfortable, group dwelling-place into a private, comfortable, abode for family. As a professional designer it helped me gain a deeper appreciation for the social innovations that are necessary in order for design solutions to be accepted and incorporated into our daily lives. Each chapter features a painting or photograph to which Rybczynski makes reference within the chapter's text. This approach is highly informative, but

leads to my only two complaints about the book (rationale for only 4 stars);1) Mediocre quality of the images.2) Only a single image per chapter. The text would have benefited from additional visual references to illustrate the chapter points.

This book contains a treasury of information useful in understanding home life in western civilization through the ages. All this is necessary for the understanding of our architecture, literature and our history in general. Rybczynski uses the concept of comfort as it evolved in homes to tie it together. And comfortable is a good way to describe his writing style. An academically rigorous study set out in a very readable manner. Excellent.

Exceptionally well written and highly enjoyable to read. I as an architect learned so much. I recommend it highly to anyone interested in how we live in our society

A great insights about the idea of comfort and the home. It has made me rethink my own home.

Very interesting. I never knew that homes were once considered just a shelter, and had nothing to do with comfort.

A book of the philosophy of Home - interesting read about the use of space, furniture, and the things you choose to surround yourself and your family. A broadening and accessible read.

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