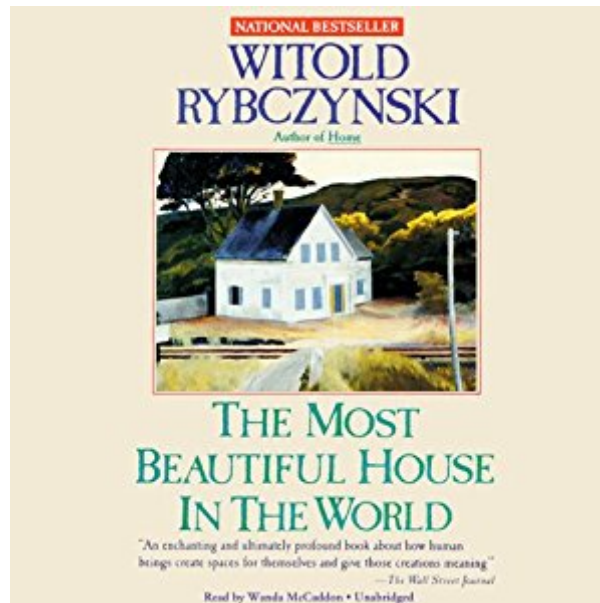




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# The Most Beautiful House In The World



## Synopsis

Witold Rybczynski takes us on an extraordinary odyssey as he tells the story of designing and building his own house. His project began as a workshop but through a series of "happy accidents" the structure gradually evolved into a full-fledged house. In tracing this evolution, he touches on matters both theoretical and practical, writing on such diverse topics as the ritualistic origins of the elements of classical architecture and the connections between dress and habitation. He discusses feng-shui and considers the theories of such architects as Palladio, Le Corbusier, and Frank Lloyd Wright. An eloquent examination of the links between being and building, *The Most Beautiful House in the World* offers insights into the joys of "installing ourselves in a place, of establishing a spot where it would be safe to dream."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book by the author of *"Home: A Short History of an Idea"* (1986) is a more subjective and less disciplined examination of that same topic. Professor Rybczynski uses his experience as an immigrant trying to "fit in" as a lens for looking at what it means to build one's own home. The skeleton of this story is the author's own decision to build a shed to which he can retreat on weekends (for more on weekends, read the author's *"Waiting for the Weekend,"* 1991) and build a boat he can sail away in. At some point the shed becomes more of a barn and then, when he finally abandons his plan to build a boat, it becomes a permanent home for himself and his wife. For me, the book is less about architecture, the act or craft of building, and more about morphing and the unpredictable ways life unfolds. Taken in that vein, Rybczynski's story can be appreciated as a

spiritual journey with many sidetrips and gentle awakenings. He is self-critical, but not self-deprecating. And he infuses his tale with enough humor to keep the reader interested without taxing credibility. I especially enjoyed his description of his wife, Shirley, who does some morphing of her own. At the beginning (when the couple was building a mere boathouse), she is little more than an extra pair of hands; when the couple decides to make the structure they have been building into their home, Shirley suddenly becomes a full-fledged "client," full of opinions and demands. Although, Rybczynski describes several impressive architect conceived and built houses (such as Wright's Fallingwater and Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth house), it is the houses built by their owners that he most celebrates--Mark Twain's home in Hartford, Connecticut, Sir Walter Scott's Abbotsford, Robert Lewis Stevenson's Vailima in Samoa, artists Carl and Karin Larsson's much documented Lilla Hyttnas in Sundborn, Sweden, and Carl Jung's home in Bollingen, Switzerland. "It is no coincidence," writes Rybczynski, "that Stevenson, Scott, Clemens, Larsson, Castrejon, and I were less than forty years old when we built our homes.... The process of building, for all of us, was a process of installing ourselves in a place, of establishing a spot where it would be safe to dream. We had to be old enough to recognize the particularity--and limits--of our dreams, but not too old to believe in them.... My house had begun with the dream of a boat. The dream had run aground--I was now rooted in place." (pp. 190, 193)

Anyone living in any sort of dwelling couldn't help but enjoy this fine book. And Rybczynski is an exceptionally clear writer; he's a pleasure to read. I wish I had found this book 20 years ago. Don't build or buy another house until you read this. If you're really hot for a new place to live be sure to read Rybczynski's "Home" also.

The book provided some history and foundation of architecture in an enjoyable manner. I've become a fan of this author.

Beautifully written and full of wisdom about what it means to build your own shelter.

Great service ÃfÃ¢Ã â ÑÃ Â great book

This book did not come close to meeting my expectations. Of the 200 pages in this book, scarcely 30 actually pertain to the author's house building experience. It appears "the Most Beautiful House" subject was merely a excuse to ramble from one topic to another. One minute he is talking about

animal sacrifices & liver divining, the next he is discussing the verb "to habit". I was sorely disappointed and struggle to find any redeeming quality in this work. Readers be warned that this book is a motley crew of diatribes on topics having little to do with *The Most Beautiful House in the World*.

I loved this book because it showed how a homebuilder's view can change in the process of constructing a building. Mr. Rybczynski's original quest to build a boathouse, worthy in itself, expanded to construct a home for he and his wife. I liked the exterior of the completed building because it was compact, simple, yet had sufficient flourishes to establish itself as a work of architecture rather than a clone of many similar sized small houses. My wife and I built our house and can affirm that building your own home is a very satisfying experience.

A wall of glass bottles was the final feature completing the house Witold Rybczynski built for himself. On the oval bottom of a brown bottle of Armagnac, he inscribed the date and the names of his coworkers and signed off like an ancient craftsman: "RYBCZYNSKI FECIT." This gem of a book rewards the reader with a wealth of meaning in those words, "Rybczynski made it," revealing the whole experience - esthetic, architectural, didactic, domestic, historical, laborious, linguistic, mechanical, philosophical, poetic, sensory, symbolic - contained in this house. As it takes shape in the reader's mind, the sense of building unfolds, constructing once again Heidegger's unity: building-dwelling-thinking. The book owes its arresting title to Joseph Rykwert, chairman of the doctoral program in architecture at the University of Pennsylvania, who invited Mr. Rybczynski to address his seminar on the subject of a design competition sponsored by an Italian journal. The author responded, "The most beautiful house in the world is the one that you build for yourself." In a previous study, *Home: A Short History of an Idea*, Mr. Rybczynski, who teaches architecture at McGill University in Montreal, went beyond architecture to provide a fascinating historical exploration of domestic well-being. In his new book, he tells what it means to build his own home. First Mr. Rybczynski dreamed of a boat, then of a shelter to build it in - something between a shed and a cathedral. He and his wife, Shirley Hallam, decided to include temporary living quarters in the plan, with the idea of constructing a house nearby sometime in the future. They chose a site, he ruminated over designs, enlisted the help of his wife and his friend Vikram Bhatt, an Indian architect. They poured a foundation before completing the design. In vacation periods, on weekends and afternoons after work they put their energies into the project. Mr. Rybczynski assembled notes, made drawings, jotted down reflections on architecture and reviewed the experience of his practice.

This building, in the reader's mind, grows larger than a shed or even a cathedral; it concretizes architecture and all its connections. As time passed the author wondered: a boatbuilding workshop or a house? The living quarters expanded and the intended boat shrank from dory ketch to catboat. The building should look traditional; it must fit the location, speak the local language. He chose the form of a barn. Vast barns dominated the landscape, he explains, "and if my building was to fit it, it could only be as a little offspring of these heroic leviathans." For a year and a half he immersed himself in its paper existence, gestating a hybrid dream that looked like a barn but sheltered boatbuilding at the west end, living quarters at the east. Then these three builders, colonists in the meadow, people with little experience in construction, put up frame and sheathing in a few weeks, working with hand tools. They changed the place, occupied the meadow; it was "the reenactment of a primeval process that began with the first hut erected in a forest clearing, and it gave me the feeling of playing out an ancient ritual." At sunset the glass bottles of the final wall "blazed with the amber and emerald colors of several hundred wine and liquor bottles - a bacchanalian rose window." The physical house sank the maritime dream, partly in the weariness of construction, partly by fulfillment. He explains: "After years of designing on the drawing table . . . I had wanted to build something, anything, with my own hands and with proper tools and real materials." The Rybczynskis turned the boatbuilding workshop into living quarters, decided to make a comfortable permanent home instead of temporary shelter. This transformation changed Shirley from an associate builder into a client, who challenged him with questions, objections, demands. She had a better knowledge of house design than he, "not of construction but of the details, of the minutiae of everyday life that constitute a home." She refused improvised solutions and rejected an inconvenient kitchen, insisting on a design that would not hide things in cupboards; she suggested important modifications in other rooms as well. Furthermore, the house did not look right; she wanted to dwell in a home, not a building that looked like a barn. It lacked the familiar signs of human habitation: proper windows, a porch, a chimney, a real front door. After the final changes, including a front door and portico, the house spoke a new message. "It was a comforting sight as one came down the long drive. 'Welcome home,' it said." Five years after Mr. Rybczynski made his first sketch of a boatbuilding shed, he and his wife moved in. The book acknowledges the wisdom of the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, that a house shelters daydreaming. At home it is safe to let the mind drift, to let imagination wander. And dreams contain houses. Even though the author still calls his home "The Boathouse," he concludes: "My house had begun with the dream of a boat. The dream had run aground - I was now rooted in place." Most readers of this book are spared the labor and frustration as well as the fulfillment eloquently described here. Until recently it was not

unusual for people to build their own homes - a privilege still reserved to the so-called underdeveloped world. For us, the experience is fragmented, divided among designers, contractors, tradesmen, brokers, dwellers. We may not be able or willing to dwell in houses we design and build, but this book makes it possible to recover in our imaginations that lost unity of experience. The illustrations, often crucial in an architectural book, are disappointing. Mr. Rybczynski claims the sketches are his graphic record of an inner conversation and offers 14 drawings by his own hand. Unfortunately, they are tiny, but they are compensated for by lucid, eloquent word pictures and the inner conversation keeps the reader charmed to the last page.

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