

Contemporary Notions of Home: An Interview with Witold Rybczynski

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How have our notions of home shifted over the last twenty years since you wrote your book, *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (1987)?

Henry Kissinger once asked Mao Tse-Tung if he thought the French Revolution was a success. “I think it’s too early to tell,” answered the Chairman. Cultural ideas evolve at a glacial pace so twenty years is not a long time for something as deeply rooted as our notion of home. This is worth emphasizing, since the media is forever telling us that fads and fashions are “changing our world.” Maybe—or maybe not.

Seventy years ago, when people stopped dressing for dinner—I mean in dinner jackets—it must have seemed to many an unthinkable lapse in domestic manners. Yet I don’t think that it drastically altered our idea of home. Neither have home entertainment systems, or home offices. It’s true that generally speaking, we tolerate increasingly casual behavior—inside the home and out—but while this does change the way that new houses are planned, it has not fundamentally altered our notion of home, either.

There is one societal development that might eventually have an effect on the home: the massive entry of women into the work force. Gender and home have interacted in the past. The medieval home, where people lived, worked, and played, was neither masculine nor feminine, rather, a neutral, communal place. Middle-class homes in the eighteenth century were distinctly masculine (just look at Georgian furniture), and home decoration was a man’s business. During the Victorian era, the home became

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literally and figuratively the “woman’s place.” Ideas of home, family, and the “woman of the house,” were inextricably intertwined. Today, the increased absence of working women from the home could change this. But exactly how? Will rules of behavior change? Will decor become less feminine? More masculine? Or will the home become neutral, as it once was? Too early to tell.

How do current conceptions of public and private affect our sense of home?

In *Home* I argued that the invention of domestic comfort was closely linked to the discovery of privacy and the individual’s inner life. Perhaps the most important indicator of the latter was the spread of literacy and silent reading, and the popularity of the novel. Creating a private and introspective family retreat lies at the heart of the bourgeois home. It is a fundamental institution of Anglo-American culture, hence the so-called castle laws that specially protect the sanctity of the home, and that impose special (and often more severe) punishments on those who violate it.

More than thirty years ago, Martin Pawley wrote a prophetic book titled *The Private Future* (1973). Since then, the privatization that he foretold has, if anything, accelerated. Personal computers, home video, the Internet, E-shopping, cell phones, blogs, iPods, the list goes on. In that context, the importance of the home, which is the traditional setting for private pursuits, could only be expected to grow.

Commentators have frequently observed that Americans seem to be attaching more importance to their homes, decorating more, going out less, and so on. I dislike the word “cocooning,” but if we do increasingly retreat to our homes, it is surely not because we love our homes more, but because we love public places less. In the name of freedom of personal expression, we now tolerate an extraordinarily wide range of behaviors (smoking excepted) in the public realm, so it’s little wonder that those with a choice prefer to stay home.

What do you mean by your phrase “domestic well-being” when you write in *Home*: “Domestic well-being is a fundamental need that is deeply rooted in us, and that must be satisfied. If that need is not met in the present, it is not unnatural to look for comfort in tradition” (217)?

Our society, obsessed as it is with novelty, tends to think of the past as a burden, rather than as a gift. One of the most precious traditions of Anglo-American culture is the idea of home, which is why I stressed the fact that domestic well-being includes an awareness of history. As I write this, I’m looking at a replica of an early Virginian wing chair. Not only is it comfortable to sit in, it’s also a link to our heritage, just as much as Shakespeare and Bach. The great mistake of the architectural moderns was to imagine that to embrace modernity it was necessary to jettison the past. Not at all. You can sit

in a wing chair and still use a Blackberry. One of the unexpected results of the (new) Internet has been a revival of (old-fashioned) reading and writing. You can have your cake and eat it, too.

An aspect of domestic well-being is self-expression, that is, creating surroundings that say something about who we are: independent-minded individualists, middle-of-the-roaders, traditionalists, progressives, and so on. That is why I'm uncomfortable with interiors that are professionally decorated—they can be beautiful, but are also oddly impersonal. It's much more interesting to be in a home that tells you something about its occupants.

What sorts of notions of home are architects drawing on these days?

The last American architect of note to have a major influence on the public's idea of home was Frank Lloyd Wright. I think that there are many adventurous architects today, but I don't think any are addressing the sort of domestic issues that ordinary homebuyers face. Our best house architects—Robert A. M. Stern, Hugh Newell Jacobson, Marc Appleton—are designing houses that are so large and so expensively appointed that most of us can only dream about them. Even a television program such as *This Old House*, which features more modest architect-designed houses, represents a drop in the bucket. Very few Americans live in homes designed by architects. Of the roughly two million new houses built last year, the overwhelming majority were standardized models built by production builders. Part of this is simple economics: a good production builder can deliver a house for fifty dollars a square foot; a similarly equipped architect-designed house will cost four times as much, at least.

Having said that, there are a number of observations that can be made about the houses built by production builders. First, they can be very large and expensive. It used to be that production houses were low-end—think Levittown—and expensive houses were custom-designed. No longer. Just as designer-label, off-the-rack suits now sell for more than made-to-measure, production houses can cost as much as a million dollars.

The design of production houses is an interesting blend of past and present. Only in the period 1945–70 have Americans embraced radical innovation in house design: carports, picture windows, ranch houses. Before and since, houses have been decidedly traditional, with gables, dormers, shutters, divided lights, porches, the works. But only on the exterior; the interior is modern. That is, the plan is extremely open. You can see the entire house as soon as you open the front door.

The layouts of new houses have changed significantly in the last twenty years. The center of the home is now the kitchen/family room, really one large open space. I think it reflects our desire for more casual living. Wright introduced Americans to the tiny “workplace” kitchen. Today, kitchens are huge, not so much because we spend more

time cooking, but because the kitchen has become a social place where we entertain. In the process, formal living rooms have almost disappeared.

There seem to be conflicting trends. On the one hand, gated communities, which respond to the growing sense of fear among Americans, are growing in popularity. They also tap into a nostalgia about a past, in which neighborhoods were functioning communities, rather than locations in which houses existed in proximity. On the other hand, interesting things are going on in urban mixed dwelling development, where housing of different kinds and costs are being built in close proximity. Are suburban planned communities, gated communities, and new housing developments making use of conflicting notions of home?

Gated communities are a blend of security and snobbism. It used to be that only Beverly Hills estates and Park Avenue apartment houses had restricted access, that is, manned gates and doormen. Now, in time-honored American fashion, these status symbols have trickled down—slightly. According to the latest figures, only about four percent of Americans live in gated communities (most located in California, the Southwest, and Florida). So let's keep things in perspective.

Traditional neighborhood development, also referred to as New Urbanism, accounts for even fewer people. If gated communities are about exclusivity, neo-traditional neighborhoods are, at least in theory, about heterogeneity. I say “in theory” because all new residential developments have a built-in measure of exclusivity because of the high cost of land. They only look like Frank Capra's idea of a small town (which was always, in any case, a fiction). That said, this is definitely a better way of planning suburbs: more compact, more walkable, more architecturally varied.

Urban neighborhoods tend to be more mixed, and the density can certainly support a wider range of amenities, which contributes to their liveliness. But most downtowns (San Francisco, Seattle, Boston) cater to a very narrow segment of the population, the occasional subsidized housing project notwithstanding. While SoHo and Chelsea may not be gated, they are just as exclusive as any suburban planned community, thanks to the high cost of real estate.

Most people—rich or poor—have always been more comfortable living among people who are more or less like them (which is the definition of “neighborhood,” after all). Yet American society is becoming more mixed, more varied, more diverse, thanks to unprecedented levels of immigration, and the post-industrial economy has created widely divergent income groups (I hesitate to call them classes). Resolving these contradictions is one of the great challenges facing our society. My own guess is that the requisite mixing will take place in public places—the street, the park (and the theme park), the shopping mall, the stadium, the multiplex, and the airport—not in the neighborhood or the home.