

American Studies 333.01  
House and Home in America  
MWF 1:00-1:50  
GHH 208  
Roger Williams University  
Fall Semester, 2013

Michael R. H. Swanson, Ph. D.  
Office: GHH 215  
Hours: M, T, W, Th, F: 11:00 - 12:00  
Or By Appointment  
Phone: 254 - 3230  
Email: [mrswanson@rwu.edu](mailto:mrswanson@rwu.edu)

Week of September 30, 2013

For Monday, September 30

Having left the city and begun to understand suburbs as places, we now begin to introduce ourselves to the American Suburban Home, in many ways the core of the American Dream. We've seen that whatever the suburban house was, it was not a farm house, no matter how much we romanticized "Home Sweet Home." Nor was it the humble log cabin, no matter how much we romanticized that, either. We start working in three books at this point, adding Home, a Short History of an Idea to the mix.

Read, in Home: A Short History of an Idea, by Witold Rybczynski

Chapter 1, Nostalgia, pp. 1-14

Chapter 2, Intimacy and Privacy, pp. 15 - 50

During the six years of my architectural education the subject of comfort was mentioned only once . . . it was a curious omission from an otherwise rigorous curriculum; one would have thought that comfort was a crucial issue in preparing for the architectural profession, like justice in law, or health in medicine

This is not a book about interior decoration. It is not so much the reality of the home that is my subject as the idea of the home, and although history is here, it is the present that concerns me.

Witold Rybczynski, Forward, vii-viii

We make a distinction between the ideas house and home, though both describe the same space. Rybczynski's book is quite remarkable, in that the author explores one of our most basic cultural artifacts to explain its origin. As we'll see the ideas which form the basic American home comes from many different places and appear over a long period of time. The modern Western house usually dated to the invention of the chimney, which happens more recently than one might think: only a generation or so before the Pilgrims and Puritans venture to North America in the early 17th century.

We will need to understand something of Rybczynski's writing technique in order to get the most out of him. Unlike most scholarly authors, he doesn't at all hesitate to use the word I in his

writings. He is not at all anonymous, and he shares not only his thoughts, but the processes by which he reaches them, as well. This is a rare privilege. I hope you'll enjoy it. I hope you will also use it in the writing you do for me.

### Chapter I. Nostalgia

Writing nearly twenty years ago, Witold Rybczynski begins with a most unlikely character, the designer Ralph Lauren. Today, he could still use him to introduce the concept of nostalgia and the concept of comfort, but he would most likely include Martha Stewart in his list of examples. This chapter will introduce you to thinking about the conscious creation of images, and using imagery to "invent" traditions: creating, as it were, pasts which never were. How does one express Americanism in domestic building?

### Chapter II. Intimacy and Privacy.

Language is not just a medium, like a water pipe, it is a reflection of how we think.

Here, we'll learn that "comfort" like many other ideas, is a cultural invention. As Rybczynski will show us, it really has very little to do with questions of temperature or humidity. The distinction between house as place and home as place may actually relate most closely to the invention of the idea of comfort, and the application of this concept to the house.

We can talk about some desires or needs we have as being "ends in themselves," and others as being "means to an end." This will be the case in considering "privacy" and "intimacy." We usually think of privacy as being such a fundamental human need that it is hard to consider that its absence from early houses was not a problem arising from poverty or ignorance. People didn't seek what they didn't need. This may suggest that privacy isn't so much an "end in itself" as a means invented to achieve something else. This other thing is what Rybczynski calls intimacy, and most particularly, a kind of intimacy called *stimmung*. Make sure you understand the meaning of this word borrowed from the German. How do you create *stimmung* in your environment? why not write a bit about that in the clog?

For Wednesday, October 2

I need to get sense of how you're reacting to the third book we're juggling, so I'm not going to add any new readings for today. We'll see how discussion time goes on Monday, and if we run out of time I'll continue it today. If we do get finished, in good order I want to show a video visit in the Weald and Downland Museum in England. The American house doesn't start in America, and the Weald and Downland Museum is a great place to get a sense of what houses were like in England just before the first settlers came to Jamestown or Plimoth.

For Friday, October 4

Read, in Rybczynski,

Chapter 3, Domesticity, pp. 51 - 76

We've read in Jackson and Stilgoe about the increasing role of women in and around the house in nineteenth century America. But this process began in Europe much earlier. The feminization of the home in seventeenth-century Holland was one of the most important events in the evolution of the domestic interior. This parallels the ideas we encountered in *Borderland*, suggesting the imprinting of feminine ideas on the suburban environment. You'll find in Rybczynski that there is a parallel reason that this happens. This should reinforce the idea that parallel cultural experiences evoke parallel responses.

Rybczynski suggests that we get our ideas of Privacy and Intimacy from the Scandinavians, who seem among the first to carve up larger spaces into smaller, more private, ones. If we are to believe him, domesticity--those characteristics which tell us that what we see is "home" not "office" other kinds of space, comes from the Dutch. We will see how the family structure in Holland influences both the rise in status of the kitchen and the use of certain specific types of decorative objects throughout the house. At least one of those visual cues or icons of domesticity appears on the Stonewall dormitories for just this reason.

Rybczynski suggests that part of feminizing the house was accomplished by taking the ordinary domestic objects associated with women's roles in the household, and transforming them from useful to decorative objects.

Associated with the rise of domesticity was the growth in popularity of the still life composition in painting. We'll take a look at some of these.

## Looking Ahead

Every so often one comes across a book which is coherent in its narrative that it cries out to be read as a full work before one begins to break it down for analysis. Such a book is Tracy Kidder's *House*, the story of one architect, one family, complete with inlaws, and a small but very interesting construction firm, "Apple Corps". No fiction here, though you may see little echoes of Mr. Blandings Builds his Dream House. The end result you see below. I'd like to have you get started reading it, though we won't discuss it until the end of the semester. You'll see it reads like a novel...aim for finishing it in a month. I'll nudge you from time to time.