



Looking Around: A Journey Through Architecture

Witold Rybczynski

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From the opening sentences of his first book on architecture. Home, Witold Rybczynski seduced readers into a new appreciation of the spaces they live in. He also introduced us to "an unerringly lucid writer who knows how to translate architectural ideas into layman's terms" (The Dallas Morning News). Rybczynski's vast knowledge, his sense of wonder, and his elegantly uncluttered prose shine on every page of his latest meditation on the art of building. Looking Around is about architecture as an art of compromise - between beauty and function, aspiration and engineering, builders and clients. It is the story of the Seagram Building in New York and the Wexner Center for the Visual Arts in Columbus, Ohio - a museum that opened without a single painting on view, so that critics could better appreciate its design. But what of the visitors who want a building that displays art well? What of those who work in the building? Looking Around explores the notion of the architect as superstar and assesses giants from Palladio to Michael Graves, styles from classicism to high tech. It demonstrates how architecture actually works - or doesn't - in corporate headquarters, airports, private homes, and the special buildings designed to represent our civilization. For all its erudition, Looking Around is also bracingly straightforward. Rybczynski looks closely and critically at structures that may once have dazzled us with their ostentation and expense, and sees them as triumphs or failures - of aesthetic ideals and of lasting function. This is a fascinating and illuminating book about an art form integral to our lives.

Looking Around: A Journey Through Architecture Details

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From Reader Review Looking Around: A Journey Through Architecture for online ebook

Becky says

Brilliant little book which reads more like a series of short stories (originally his magazine column, I think). Middle section not so interesting, but I he has a light touch and is consistent in his support of the minor over the major.

Owen says

Here is an unusual book: Witold Rybczynski takes us wandering through the professional byways of a subject usually reserved for a more intellectual readership, if such a thing exists. Why architecture is important and what makes it so is the subject matter here, brought to us by a very competent writer. Delightfully so, in fact, as Rybczynski has the storyteller's ability to weft and weave.

The stories he has chosen here are a mixed bunch and we are asked to think about such diverse constructions as the American bungalow, the Grow Home and public buildings like the Canadian Centre for Architecture. He has stories to tell about all of them, the people who live in or use them and the odd trends which are sometimes responsible for a particular design. As he points out, although we use architecture every day of our lives and are clearly affected by it (whether we know it or not), we are more than prone to take it for granted. Should we not be more aware of what's around us, in general? This book offers up some thoughtful ideas on the subject.

Lobstergirl says

I imagine these magazine pieces would have felt relevant for a year or so after publication, but by 1992 when this collection was assembled, their shelf life was approaching its end. Rybczynski's writing has none of the freshness of an architecture critic like Paul Goldberger, or the pungency of a Robert Hughes. It has a blandness that would be at home in an airline magazine. I also have to question his taste, given that he approves of Robert Graves' Portland Municipal Building but not of I.M. Pei's National Gallery, East Wing. (It reminds him of shopping malls, hotels and office buildings, what with its soaring atrium filled with nothing, and art galleries shoved to the perimeter. Nevermind that the atrium is filled with art, and the galleries are fine, not badly lit, not awkwardly proportioned.)

The article "Shaping Chicago's Future" was interesting, if only because it described buildings in the planning stages at the time the book went to press, which never ended up being built, like the 2000-foot Miglin-Beitler Tower, designed by Cesar Pelli (who went on to build the Petronas Towers). Poor Lee Miglin went on to be murdered by Versace-killer Andrew Cunanan, in 1997.

Austin Larson says

After I really enjoyed Rybczynski's *Last Harvest* a couple of months ago, I picked up two more of his books. I had no idea that this book was 20 years old before I read it, but most of it still feels very applicable. There are only a couple references to technology that feel dated. He expands on many of the themes that I enjoyed in *Last Harvest*, particularly the way that houses and residential architecture can be used through time as an indicator of the views and values of American society at a particular point in time. My favorite thing about Rybczynski, and the reason that this book makes a nice corollary to Alain De Botton's *Architecture of Happiness*, is that he is beholden to no particular architectural movement and above all insists that architecture must be humane and respectful of context.

Stephen says

"Looking Around" has aged in places (it's a collection of magazine pieces from the late 1980's and early 1990's), but is still an engaging read. Rybczynski's a thoughtful and graceful writer, and the book is refreshingly free of jargon -- anybody who's interested in the ideas behind architecture will find something to like here.

Nat says

Mildly entertaining collection of magazine essays on architecture. Reasonably advocates that more attention be paid to ordinary, "background", architecture rather than the monumental projects (skyscrapers, museums, monuments, etc.) architects focus on.

Caryl says

This was a wonderful book on the different aspects of architecture. It covered a wide variety of architectural ideas in essay form. It took me a long time to complete the book but I am glad I was introduced to the writer and would read more of his work. It does assist me in being more observant when looking at buildings.

Lauren says

This is an outstanding collection. The essays are near history, written in the 80-90s and gave me a lot of insight into the minds of architects trained during postmodernism. Since those people were my teachers, the book felt like a series of ah-ha moments. The series of essays on housing and development was particularly notable.

Potential drawback is the lack of pictures. I looked up many of the projects discussed, which helped. If you're not an architect already familiar with the works discussed, you might want to read these with the internet handy for image searches. I looked things up throughout and found it beneficial.

Maureen says

I really enjoyed this book, which meanders through architecture discussing important differences between domestic briefs, galleries, public buildings and more.

He is scathing of domestic mock gables hiding flat rooves, hyperactive street facades and boring unadorned walls facing the rear garden where people spend most of their time.

The author discusses some of the famous traditional and modernist architects and their work, highlighting examples of the best and worst of each type, for example Schiphol airport which has no advertising (bliss) and has cartoons running on TV monitors. There are showers and rest cabins and lounges heavily padded in fabric so you can lie down and sleep. Compare with Sydney's overtly commercial terminal and I know which I would prefer. Good architecture can't be achieved with a bad client.

Ben says

A excellent, though perhaps slight, collection of essays on architecture as lived experience. These are personal commentaries, not didactic critiques, yet there is much of value in them. From the final essay, "The Art of Building": "When the link between design and construction is broken, as it is in so many modern buildings, architecture is the loser, and architects are cast adrift, searching for inspiration in history, philosophy, sculpture, and painting."

Finlay says

A collection of articles on various architecture topics, intended for the lay-person

Kara says

3.5 stars. I was introduced to Witold Rybczynski's writing way back in high school, when I had to read his book *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (which I reread again this past summer). In my opinion, *Looking Around* was more readable than *Home*, if only because it's more of an anthology of articles that Rybczynski previously wrote for various publications. I don't think any section was longer than 15 pages, and many were only 5 or so pages long, which made this book very easy to read as I had random pockets of free time.

Originally published in 1993, some of this book's examples and ideas are naturally outdated today. For example, Rybczynski seems to have a generally favorable opinion of Le Corbusier, who has of course fallen out of fashion now in contemporary urban planning circles. In addition, some of the architectural examples could certainly be updated to more recent buildings. If this book had been more recent I would have bumped it up to 4 stars.

Speaking personally, I did enjoy the moments when Rybczynski threw some shade at the developments near Tysons Corner (which were just beginning at the time of his writing). As someone who lives near-ish Tysons Corner nearly 25 later, I can confirm that the area's architecture is just as bland and inspiring as it was then.

Oh, yeah, this is my cities book for February. Two books down, 10 more to go in 2017!

Heidi says

I love Witold Rybczynski and reading about the art and meaning of buildings. This is a fine overview of both homes and public architecture. It's a bit dated in some ways -- written in the early 1990s, but I still learned a lot. From bungalows, to Eero Saarinen's Habitat in Montreal, to traditional urban courtyard homes in China, to Eames, to the John Hancock Building, to airports, to malls. Lots of fun and all in small, easy to read chapters. Just wish there were more pictures!

JoAnna says

Three-line review: When I picked this up at a used bookstore last year, I thought it would be some sort of commentary about how society interacts with, reflects, and relates to the buildings in their everyday lives. Unfortunately, it's a series of articles about various architectural aspects — suburban design, choosing an architect, the design of malls and shrines, etc. — and it was ridiculously boring. Without an architectural background, this book was just a collection of names, terminology, and analysis that didn't mean anything to me.

Terri says

Planning on building a house, I was especially interested in Rybczynski's thoughts and insights about homes and what they should look like. From the start I was captivated. Wanting to be sleek and modern, I thought an architect would quickly confirm my ideas. Instead, at the start of the book Rybczynski, with reasoning, brings the reader back to the traditional home and approves of it; and makes me want to build one... and live in a lovely little neighborhood.

He moves beyond the house and *Looking Around* takes us into the cities and towns to look at public buildings like art museums. The history and progression that he packs into this book is very insightful.

He says, "I am not arguing for a historical style as much as for a historical attitude- *deja-vu*, as opposed to *avant-garde*. An awareness of history- of the successes and failures of the past should inform architectural design to a greater degree than it now does."
