

House Hunting

The Most Beautiful House in the World

by Witold Rybczynski.
Viking, 211 pp., \$18.95

Martin Filler

The stylistic confusion of American architecture since the late Seventies has prompted some people to try to take control of the design of their surroundings rather than entrust their houses to the perceived whims of professionals. Many people are disaffected with the contemporary architectural scene because they feel that high-style architects are more concerned with developing their own ideas and imposing them on their clients than they are in creating houses responsive to what the inhabitants might want or need.

Although other art forms have long been freed from the necessity of sponsorship, architecture still requires the direct instigation of a patron. The relation between architect and client mistakenly implies the likelihood that the client will approve of the results. But it is one thing to ask a portraitist to repaint an unflattering chin, and quite another to ask an architect to alter a building after it has been completed. The seemingly irrevocable nature of most architectural decisions is reinforced by the scale and permanence of what has been constructed, yet it is also much more common for buildings to be altered after the fact by someone other than their creator than is ever the case with a painting or a sculpture.

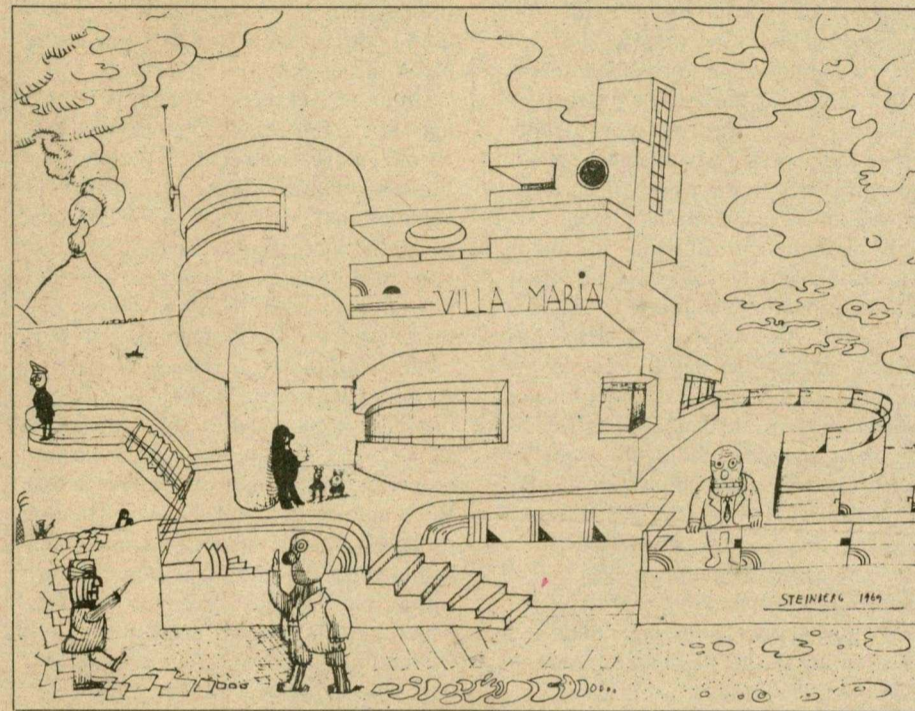
What is remarkable about the several first-person accounts written in recent years by the proud patrons of great twentieth-century architects (especially the owners of houses by Frank Lloyd Wright¹) is not that there have been so many of them, but rather that there haven't been more. For every achievement in the history of domestic architecture that brings pleasure to its owner, there are many more that bring acute disappointment, though few clients react with such bitterness as Dr. Edith Farnsworth did after Ludwig Mies van der Rohe completed his house for her at Plano, Illinois in 1951. In her unpublished memoirs she called Mies "colder and more cruel than anybody I have ever known. Perhaps it was not a friend or collaborator, so to speak, that he wanted, but a dupe and a victim."

One of the stated goals of the postmodern movement in architecture was a greater sensitivity to the people who live in or use newly designed buildings. But it is now widely acknowledged that postmodernism, which began two decades ago as a populist rejection of rigid and repetitive late modernism, has turned out to be just as formalist and schematic as the style it intended to supplant. The permissive attitude championed by such early postmodernists as Charles Moore and Robert Venturi—summed up in Venturi's famous assertion that "Main Street is almost all

¹Paul R. and Jean S. Hanna, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Hanna House: The Clients' Report* (Architectural History Foundation and MIT Press, 1981); Herbert and Katherine Jacobs, *Building with Frank Lloyd Wright: An Illustrated Memoir* (Chronicle Books, 1979); Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., *Fallingwater: A Frank Lloyd Wright Country House* (Abbeville, 1986); Henry Whiting II, with Robert G. Waite, *Teater's Knoll: Frank Lloyd Wright's Idaho Legacy* (Northwood Institute Press, 1987).

right"—was eventually replaced by the restrictive doctrines of such postmodern classicists as Michael Graves and Leon Krier, who implausibly maintain that the classical language of architecture is still understood and beloved by the general public, though little evidence of that alleged affection exists.

The increasing interest in vernacular and regional traditions among those disillusioned with both modernism and postmodernism—a plague-on-both-your-houses faction that includes many architects—has its origins in a lingering resistance to the idea of architecture as the exclusive province of the professional. There is ample historical precedent for this. Architecture was the last of the major professions to devise a formal *cursus honorum* before its practice could be undertaken. It was only about a hundred years ago that the sequence



of education, qualification, registration, and regulation began to replace the ancient apprenticeship system in architecture. Yet even in this century some of the most innovative architects—including Wright and Mies—were trained more in the medieval than in the modern manner, learning their craft in the workshop of an established master, instead of taking a university degree. Nonetheless, their experience with the processes of construction early in their careers gave them a better understanding of materials and building techniques than most college-educated architects have today.

Such professional organizations as the American Institute of Architects, founded in 1857 (the approximate equivalent of the American Bar Association and the American Medical Association in conservatism and primary commitment to protecting the proprietary prerogatives of the membership) and local architectural societies have had a central part in reinforcing the notion that architecture is an activity one can engage in only after lengthy and difficult preparation, beyond the capacities of most people. That, of course, is not true. Well into the nineteenth century the cult of the architectural amateur flourished. Familiarity with basic architectural principles had been considered an integral accomplishment of the cultivated gentleman since the High Renaissance. The expertly rendered architectural drawings of King George III, preserved at Windsor Castle, were produced under the tutelage of Sir William Chambers, one of the most prominent Neoclassical architects of the period, but instruction in architecture was by

then accessible to virtually anyone who could read, thanks to the pattern books and treatises that flooded the market.

Commissions from the aristocracy or clergy, for whom issues of image and symbolism were often paramount, customarily involved detailed and sometimes learned discourse between designer and patron. On a less theoretical or intellectual level, it was also common for clients (especially of domestic buildings) to take a direct part in the process of designing the project. Even for humble enterprises, the client would talk with the carpenter or mason before work began, and opinions or advice were freely exchanged during the course of construction. Among the unfortunate results of removing architectural practice from its once accessible place in everyday life has been the loss of a constituency with a clear idea of what an architect does and

how to get him to do what is wanted—or even how to go about determining what it is that is wanted.

Since the late 1960s, greater emphasis has been placed on engaging clients in the development of an architectural scheme, but attempts to do so have sometimes been taken to extremes. In the preparation of his work on St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, designed and constructed between 1979 and 1983 in Pacific Palisades, California, Charles Moore conducted a series of seminars for the parishioners, during which he projected scores of slides of churches from the ancient to the contemporary. Votes were then taken to rank the congregation's favorites, with the implication of incorporating features of those structures into Moore's design. Moore rather cynically termed it

this "participatory" business; which featured me not as the form giver—that's ruled out by the very process—but as the avuncular "facilitator," who would make people happy and get everybody's ideas and remove whatever impediments there were...and then by some magic laying on of hands on my part they were going to get a brilliant "arky-tect" design out of it.²

The fact that the completed Moore sanctuary bears a much closer resemblance to other works (especially houses) by Moore than it does to the churches of Gianlorenzo Bernini, Dominikus Zimmermann, Le Corbusier, and Alvar Aalto (to name a few of the

²David Littlejohn, *Architect: The Life and Work of Charles W. Moore* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984), p. 167.

more popular of the parishioners' choices) is not all that surprising. It was Moore who selected those images in the first place, and although his characteristically wide range of stylistic enthusiasms was ostensibly "inclusive" (a concept that Moore was instrumental in promoting during the Sixties), it cannot obscure the fact that the architect's biases were central to the direction the design took from the outset.

Any set of decisions about design is inevitably influenced by cultural prejudice, no matter how intent an architect might be to avoid it. Indeed, for all of the will of the Canadian architect Witold Rybczynski to return to architectural first principles, documented in his first-person account of the design and construction of what he calls "the most beautiful house in the world," the spirit of yet another contemporary architect pervades both his architecture and his book. It is that of Christopher Alexander, a radical, revisionist theoretician and author of a cult classic series of polemical texts and practical guides to the reformation of architecture. Alexander, a professor in the school of architecture at the University of California at Berkeley and founder of the Center for Environmental Structure (a combination think tank and architectural firm), first began to attract attention during the late Seventies with his system of "a pattern language" of architecture.³ The language consists of 253 design precepts in which he believes the entire accumulated wisdom of the building art is contained.

Unlike most visionary high-tech experiments of the recent past (like R. Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes or the Plug-In City by Peter Cook of the English group Archigram), Alexander's low-tech prescriptions have not only not become dated, but have slowly gained more adherents as times have changed and his goal of emphasizing the social context of buildings seems more urgent. Furthermore, after years of codifying his philosophy before putting very much of it to the unforgiving test of building (always a risky proposition for the architectural theoretician who makes sweeping proposals), Alexander has lately turned his attention to executing his designs and has done so with encouraging results, from a school in Japan to houses in the US to self-built housing for the poor in Mexico.

Alexander has eschewed yet another stylish "look" in favor of designs that vary from context to context, though all draw on traditional forms, if not historical models in the manner of the postmodernists. To say that his school in Japan seems reminiscent of Tudor rural architecture, or his Northern California villas a sympathetic continuation of the turn-of-the-century Bay Area Style, or his Mexicali scheme a restatement of ancient Roman column-and-vault construction puts too much emphasis on possible sources in an aesthetic noteworthy for its independence during a period of extreme imitiveness.

Rybczynski ruminates on the current sad state of architectural affairs in much the same way that Alexander criticizes the contemporary establishment, and indeed what both say about the appalling lack of appropriateness or attention to surround-

³Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa, and Murray Silverstein, with Max Jacobson, Ingrid Fiksdahl-King, and Shlomo Angel, *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction* (Oxford University Press, 1977).

ings in much contemporary architecture is irrefutable (though the mild-mannered Rybczynski is far gentler in tone than Alexander, who comes across as something of a Savonarola). Even the house of the book's title bears a certain resemblance to some schemes by Alexander, most notably Alexander's Linz Café of 1980 in Austria (as we can see from the pictures on the following pages), with its similar horizontal massing, vertical wood siding, overscaled fenestration, and shallow pitched roof.

Interestingly, for all their earnest rethinking the built results of both Alexander's and Rybczynski's quest for a new architectural truth look quite like the work of another Californian, the underestimated Bay Area architect William Turnbull. A sometime partner of Charles Moore, Turnbull has remained faithful to the Northern California farm-vernacular style he and Moore devised some twenty-five years ago with their then-partners Donlyn Lyndon and Richard Whitaker in the firm MLTW. That self-effacing, ecologically sensitive aesthetic (occasionally called the Sea Ranch Style after the Mendocino Coast vacation community Turnbull and Moore were largely responsible for creating) is the clear antecedent of Rybczynski's dream house. The natural wood exterior, four-paned windows, small metal chimney pipes, gable roof, and overall aura of material reticence and deference to the landscape were all fashions—or anti-fashions—that persist in Rybczynski's own house. One has the strong feeling that however thoughtful and sincere Rybczynski or Alexander is, others like Turnbull reached the same conclusions intuitively and less portentously quite some time before.

It is also curious, given the superlative in the book's title, that the publisher did not have the courage of the author/architect's convictions. The charming white-clapboard house depicted on the dust cover is not Rybczynski's at all, but rather a reproduction of Edward Hopper's 1932 painting of the colonial-style Dauphinée house on Cape Cod. Interestingly, even that is somewhat misleading: the Hopper picture is uncharacteristically sweet, with none of the power that artist could display when using domestic architecture to comment on loss and alienation in modern society. The image on the jacket is merely pretty.

In his previous, widely praised book, *Home: A Short History of an Idea*,⁴ Rybczynski covered much the same territory that Siegfried Giedion pioneered far more suggestively, but to very different ends.⁵ Giedion's intriguing discussion of the changing notions of comfort during and after the Industrial Revolution found a dim and distant echo in Rybczynski's *Home*, which tried to make the point that modernism, for all its attempts to improve the quality of life through design, had failed to achieve levels of comfort that earlier periods had attained without such intentional effort. It was a misleading polemic, for the failures of the worst of modernism were held up as the norm, rather than the numerous successes that the new architecture provided toward the betterment of the man-made environment during the first half of this century. It took an important field of inves-

tigation and twisted it to lead to some very questionable conclusions.

Rybczynski's present account of the design and fabrication of what he began as a boat-building shed and finished as a weekend house for himself and his wife in rural Hemmingford, Quebec, is informal and quaintly digressive, without the step-by-step tedium of a how-to book. The author interweaves his relation of the dilatory project (which took five years from inception to completion) with random thoughts, making it a kind of architectural *Saturday Book*: the reasons he decided to become an architect; the many famous architects who have changed their names (from Andrea Palladio, born Pietro della Gondola, to Frank Gehry, born Frank Goldberg); a brief history of building games ("What is novel is the game that Chardin has portrayed—the boy is building a *château de cartes*, a house of cards. Children have finally begun to play the building game"); the development of the long barn, and other bits of diverting information likely to pique the interest of lay readers who might otherwise be bored by the mundane realities that every architect faces in the course of bringing a drawing to three-dimensional, full-scale reality.

However, Rybczynski's repeated tendency to veer off his central theme seems to reflect his uneasiness that a general audience might not care enough about his house-building activities to work their way through an entire (albeit short) book devoted entirely to that subject. The extraordinary popular success of Tracy Kidder's 1985 book, *House*, the richly detailed and realistically ambivalent record of the building of a house for a young middle-class couple in Amherst, Massachusetts by the Boston architect William Rawn, testified to that writer's reportorial and narrative skills. Kidder gave a more complete picture of what the execution of a house is actually like than Rybczynski's new book even begins to suggest, though perhaps as architect, client, and author Rybczynski was unable to keep those roles separate enough to do justice to each in this account. But the fact that Kidder's *House* reached the best-seller lists was also a reflection of the public's interest in the subject matter. Far from architecture being an abstruse pursuit that only initiates can comprehend, it is in fact the one art form with which a great many people will be involved at least once in a lifetime, when they have some part in building or reconstructing a house.

Demystifying the architectural process, as Kidder did, is an admirable achievement for any writer, but Rybczynski does little to encourage the reader to believe that anyone less than an architect can cope with a daunting set of circumstances that included changing the program for the structure from a boat-building shed to a house, building it himself, and then correcting major mistakes after the fact—such as repositioning the front door. Yet few who read *The Most Beautiful House in the World* will be any closer than they had been before to understanding the delicate interaction between the conceptual and the physical, the practical and the aesthetic, that underlies this art of compromise and accommodation.

Rybczynski is preoccupied with trying to define the difference between building and architecture—that is, between the ordinary level of most utilitarian structures and the considerably smaller

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⁴Viking, 1986.

⁵Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History* (Oxford University Press, 1948).

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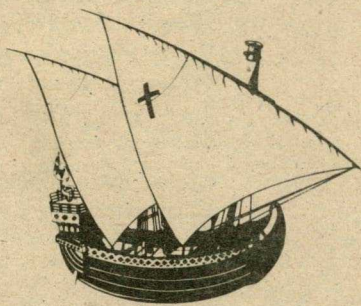
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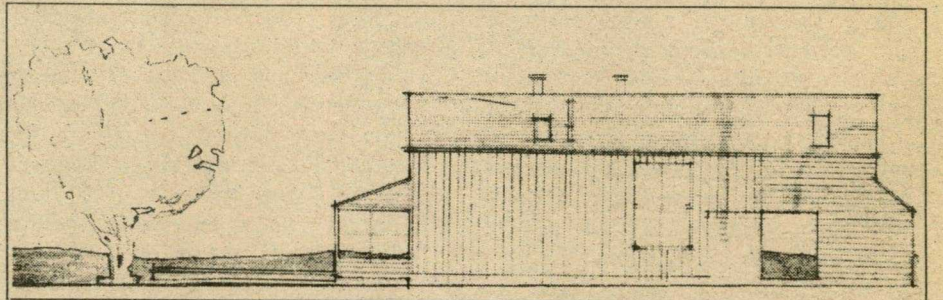
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proportion of high-style design that is the customary province of the architectural historian and critic. This is an issue one might have thought satisfactorily explored early in this century; but the views of the innovative architects of early modernism by now tend to be forgotten. Those modernist architects were, in fact, fascinated by the anonymous industrial building of the new urban landscape: the grain silos, factories, water towers, turbine sheds, and smokestacks that seemed purer in form, more ingenious in engineering, more inventive in material, and more authentic in expression than the self-conscious "free styles" of the *fin de siècle*—the regional variants of Art Nouveau that seemed progressive on the surface but were quintessentially conventional in content, superficial adaptations rather than revolutionary departures. That admiration for industrial forms, and the housing reflecting that machine aesthetic, led other modernists, such as the German Bruno Taut and the American William Wurster, to seek what they felt to be a more suitable vernacular form in farm buildings that were closer in feeling to recognizably domestic architecture than the Corbusian "machine for living in."

The acceptance of the validity of the vernacular, urban or rural, became a



Witold Rybczynski, *The Boathouse*, 1982

canon of modernist architectural belief. For some postmodernist critics it reached the point of veritable interchangeability in Mies van der Rohe's designs for his Illinois Institute of Technology campus of 1939-1958 in Chicago, at which, in Charles Jencks's simplistic analogy, Mies made the boiler house look like a chapel and the chapel like a boiler house. To the postmodernists, however, vernacular means something quite different from the improvisational wonders of industrial technology. Although such important revisionist theorists as Venturi and J.B. Jackson maintain that the roadside commercial architecture spurned by mainstream urbanists of the Fifties and Sixties is in fact our present-day vernacular, Jackson further maintains that most of what is deemed vernacular is in fact not, but rather watered-down versions of distantly reinterpreted high styles. Many present-day conservatives (including Christopher Alexander in the US and the Prince of Wales in Great Britain) believe that a vernacular whose aesthetic values are similar to those of the preindustrial age can be reconstituted through an act of will among like-thinking citizens.

During the eighteenth century, when architectural pattern books transmitted the fundamentals of classicism to otherwise uneducated builders, there was little interference of other influences, a condition that cannot pertain in today's image-saturated environment. And the means by which one could now reconstitute any architectural consensus in our pluralistic society, whether based on the classical orders of architecture or a broader acceptance of the world's folk

cultures, seems to have escaped today's advocates of back-to-basics, high style or low.

Rybczynski engages in very little polemical argument over all the things he wants his house not to be, the usual starting point for reformist architects such as Wright and Le Corbusier. He makes each of his design decisions along the way (though he has deleted a number of them to simplify the story line) seem so logical as to be inevitable. ("I chose a gable roof for my barn. A gable roof would be easier to construct than the more complicated gambrel; in any case, storage and headroom were not my main concern. And there was another reason. Overlooking my building site... was a collection of barns.... Cézanne would have appreciated the large cubic volumes and bulky geometry.") He is also appealingly self-critical, admitting to blunders in planning and execution, yet unlike many other architects he does not seem unduly haunted by things that can no longer be changed, a capacity that must place him among the happiest of his coprofessionals, among whom even the most accomplished seem to suffer from an occupational anhedonia.

Just as Alexander's writings often display an atavistic acceptance of folk-building traditions as being inherently

preferable to modern ones—such as a belief that a population of 7,000 is ideal for an urban community, or "there is abundant evidence to show that high buildings make people crazy"⁶—so does Rybczynski have a tendency to look on several superstitious beliefs with an almost Aquarian credulity. For example, he goes on at length about the ancient Chinese practice called *feng-shui* (literally, "wind and water"), a divination method by which geomancers determine the auspicious aspects of a building site based on a variety of magical signs in the terrain.

As with many other folk beliefs, *feng-shui* undoubtedly incorporates some scientifically correct observation or received wisdom based on direct experience of natural phenomena; but it needs to be dealt with skeptically as a credible system of thought. Some *feng-shui* prescriptions can certainly lead to desirable results. But even Rybczynski seems to have a hazy grasp of precisely why. "The constellations were divided into four groups [he writes]: the Azure Dragon (east), the Black Tortoise (north), the White Tiger (west), and the Red Bird (south)... Hilly ground represented the Dragon; low ground was the Tiger: the ideal was to have the Dragon on the left and the Tiger on the right (hence, to face south)." But one can always achieve southern exposure in a building without resorting to such contortions.

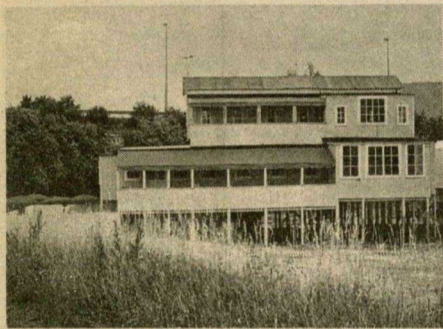
In other instances, such as I.M. Pei's newly completed Bank of China building in Hong Kong—thought to be a dis-

⁶Alexander, et al., *A Pattern Language*, p. 115.

astrous flouting of *feng-shui* by adherents of the practice—it descends into regressive superstition. Built on a site on which the Japanese executed prisoners of war during their occupation of Hong Kong, the Pei building is believed to project those evil spirits outward because of the sharp angles of its architecture. Tenants in nearby high-rises have attempted to deflect those baneful diffusions by placing cactus plants in their windows. In any event, to call *feng-shui* “a science” as Rybczynski does, when it is at best a pseudo-science, makes other of his assessments suspect.

Those include his characterization of architectural proportion as an “alchemical problem,” when it in fact has been known at least since the time of the ancient Greeks that certain mathematical relationships (most famously expressed in the Golden Section) yield harmonious effects for most architects who employ them. Connoisseurs of Chinese ceramics would take exception to Rybczynski’s claim that the “greatest Chinese art of all is gardening.” And the author, though himself an academic, displays a fairly typical architect’s animosity toward architectural historians when he disparages.

history written on the run, and often by academics who are underterred by their lack of knowledge



Christopher Alexander,
The Linz Café, 1980

or experience of how buildings are actually designed and built. Out of the hothouse atmosphere of the university seminar room has come a proliferation of isms: rationalism, historicism, postmodernism, late postmodernism, neotraditionalism, and, recently, deconstructivism.

Aside from the fact that some historians have a much better idea of how buildings are actually constructed than some architects—the division of labor in the profession today being so extreme that it is not uncommon for an architect to draw a form and then hand it to an engineer to determine if and how it can be carried out, as was the working method of the great Louis I. Kahn and his chief engineer August Komendant—it is not the rarefied climate of academe, but rather the commercial imperatives of the architectural marketplace served by the major firms that have stimulated the “proliferation of isms.”

As an architect whose main activity is teaching (Rybczynski is a professor of architecture at McGill University), the author obviously sees himself as neither a narrow theoretician nor a co-conspirator in the architectural consumer culture, but his lack of specific and revealing comment on either of the extremes he has fled from makes one glad that he has confined himself for the most part to his experiences with his own house.

There he is on safe ground, for it is extremely difficult to take exception to anything an architect elects to do when

he builds for himself. A client or a critic might complain when specific qualities are missing from a house ostensibly designed to address specific expectations, but when the architect is his own customer such criteria become irrelevant. In this case, the architect-author seems genuinely relieved to have come through an experience that was obviously more harrowing for him than it promised to be at its inception. It is hard to be unsympathetic to his very human sense of his own limitations, though those would be judged quite differently if a client were paying for his services and were less content in the end than Rybczynski is. An architect can choose to live in circumstances most other people would find inhospitable (like Paul Rudolph’s overly exposed steel-and-plexiglass eyrie perched vertiginously over New York’s FDR Drive), bizarre (like the late Bruce Goff’s hermetic boulder-and-fur-lined cave-cocoon in Tyler, Texas), or precious (like the antiques-crammed product of Michael Graves’s Biedermeier mania in Princeton). Yet who is to say that each is not well served, whatever he has chosen?

So it is with Rybczynski. If the house he finally created for himself after so much soul-searching will not live up to most reader’s expectations raised by the title of this book—though there can be great beauty in barns, his is not even a memorable example of that genre, let alone the much stiffer competition posed by houses designed by architects—one is nonetheless able to accept his opinion in the same way one does a parent’s love for a plain but endearing child.

As a text with very few illustrations to support all the aesthetic assertions the author makes, it is difficult in the end to judge his evaluation of the house’s ultimate success. Modernism has often been accused of attaching more significance to the published photographic image of a building than the physical reality of the building itself, but this book takes that imbalance to the opposite extreme. And modernism, often deemed insufficiently attentive to considerations of comfort (not least by Rybczynski in his earlier *Home*) no doubt provided as much comfort, psychic as well as physical, to many of its users as Rybczynski’s barn does to him. Yet the author throughout his story is realistic about his shortcomings, so it is very hard indeed to hold him accountable to standards he has not aspired to, no matter how extravagant the title claim by which he hoped to attract his readers’ attention.

As one of the few architects of the Eighties to question the motivations behind domestic design, in much the same way as Charles Moore did during the Sixties and Christopher Alexander during the Seventies, Witold Rybczynski has served to remind a lay readership of what a house can be as a wish-fulfillment of our deepest feelings about life. This is a noble topic, needing neither quaint embroideries of historical arcana nor anecdotal digressions to make it more engrossing than Rybczynski seems to believe. Restoring a sense of active participation in shaping the spaces we inhabit is as admirable an accomplishment as building those structures themselves. Rare is the architect who in his heart of hearts believes that writing about architecture is as worthy an occupation as building, yet when one can do both—as this book only hints—something far more permanent than even bricks and mortar is constructed. □

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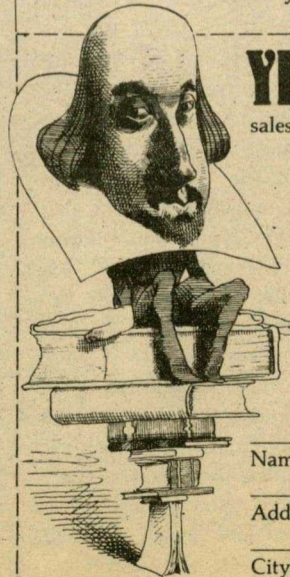
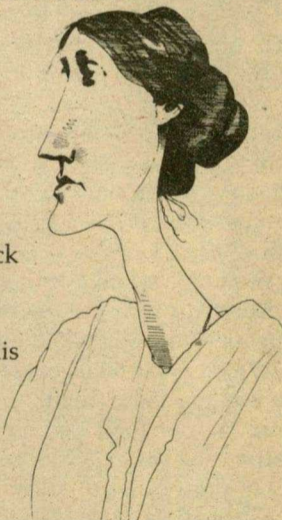
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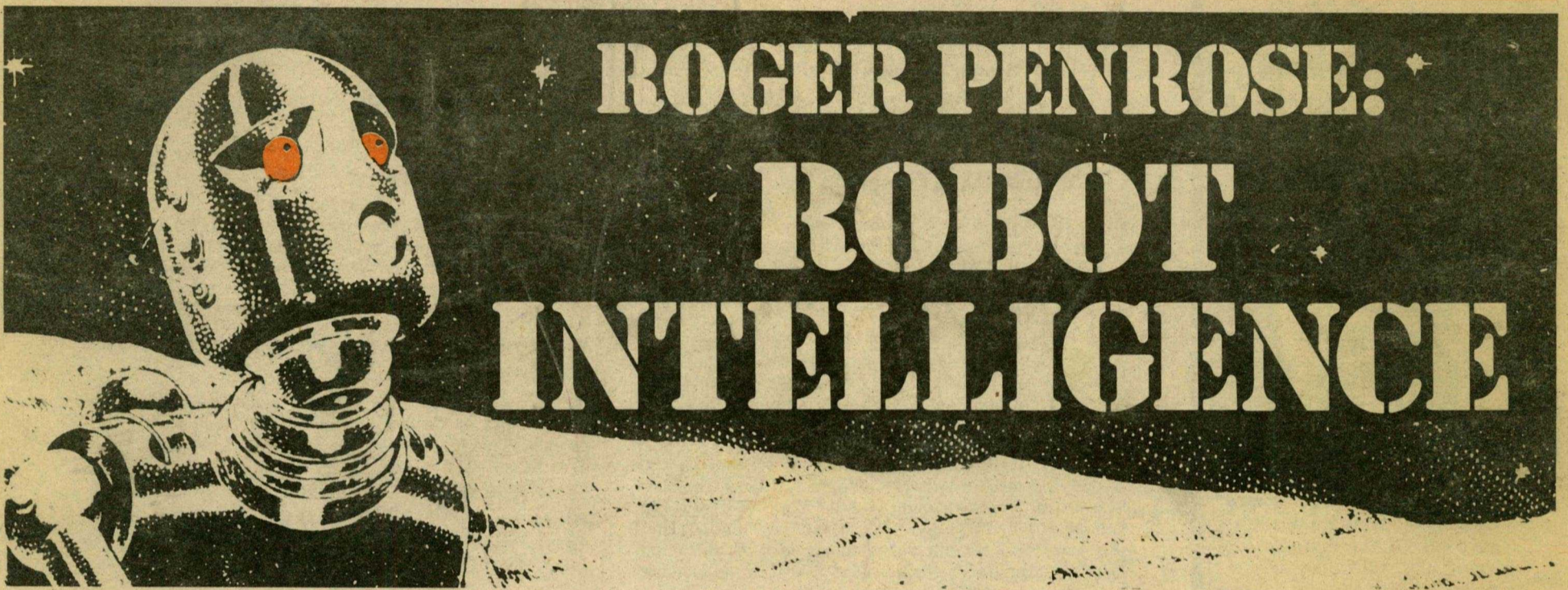
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