THE MOST BEAUTIFUL HOUSE IN THE WORLD

"The Most Beautiful House in the World" does not, of course, exist except as the ill-concieved title of an eminently readable and perceptive book by Witold Rybczinski. From his back-ground, in his own words, "as a child of Polish parents in post-war Britain, as a school-boy with an english accent, short pants, and an unpronounceable name in a small town in Canada, and as an anglais in french-speaking Quebec" Professor Rybczinski of McGill University examines an enormous variety of factors relating to the quality of design of our built environment, as well as the quality of its builders and the felicity of its occupants. This is neither a manual of the "How To Build A Cold Frame for Future Expansion to the Crystal Palace" variety nor is it a critique of contemporary design. It is, instead, the story of designing and building a shelter from conception to completion. (In building houses conception is never immaculate and completion relates only to the receipt of waivers of lien.) The chapters follow the sequence in which an orderly mind would approach the goal of achieving a practical, aesthetically pleasing, and emotionally satisfying shelter while, at the same time, providing a framework from which every imagineable digression seems reasonable and, in the end, logical and necessary to the reader's involvement in the development of the matter in hand.

A glance at the Table of Contents shows the spring-boards from which the author dives into pools both lucid and provocatively murky: Wind and Water; The Building Game; Making Space; Fitting In; Just A Barn;Chrysalis; The Mind's Eye - sounds like the Scheme of Exercises of the Chicago Literary Club, doesn't it?

The decline and fall of quality - real, imagined, or reversible - engages our attention this evening. Is the solution education, hibernation, or expanding the principles of birth control to include product control as suggested by Bernard Berenson. This problem will be examined by Bill Beauman as he reviews "Galileo's Revenge" by Peter W. Huber and then by David Maher reviewing "The Making of Moral Theology". I will initiate the proceedings with a review of Witold Rybczinski's "The Most Beautiful House In The World".

"Wind and Water" describes a city-dweller's desire to build a boat, which necessitates finding a place to do so, and then building a shed in which to do it, which results - would you believe - in building a house, which results in this book. Choosing a site begins with a lyrical description of meadow and orchard, gnarled trees, blue skies and environmental responsibility. Almost subliminally we are lured into the Taoist philosophy of Feng-shui with barely a nod to geomancy and hepatoscopy before we come up for air with anecdotes bubbling all around.

Ruskin, who said that "hundreds of people can talk for one who can think", without aligning himself with either group, and Sir Nickolaus Pevsner in his classic "Outline of European Architecture", as well as the great body of today's tourists, agree that "It is very necessary to distinguish carefully between architecture and building". This author and I disagree. To define architecture Prof. Rybczinski quotes the first english translation of Vitruvius (itself the first How To . . . Manual, published in 1624): "Well building hath three conditions: Commoditie, Firmeness, and Delight". In other words: convenient and logical planning; sound, economical construction; and beauty, both inherent and contextual. Furthermore every element of the building must address these three conditions, thus eliminating that victorian staple, the Queen Anne front with a Mary Anne behind.

A discussion of architects, with foibles and idiosyncracies scarcely mentioned, leads, via working techniques and presentations, to models of projects, thence to miniatures, thence to toys and their history, their role in education and character development, thence to games (including house of cards), thence to psychology and Bruno

Bettelheim, fetching up in Carl Jung's garden.

One of the charms of this book is the circuity and dexterity of the author's lines of reasoning. Fortunately the clarity of his rpose steers a straight course between the Scylla of Frank Lloyd Wright and the Charybdis of Vitruvious, Alberti, and Palladio, the classical arbiters of form and taste - especially having arrived there by way of Peter Collins' Gastronomic Analogy (itself enough to afflict one with mal de mer in a mill pond). Equally deft is the transition to a brilliant analysis of Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House and the perfection of its relation to its site. "Fitting In" is even more magnificently exemplified by Frank Lloyd Wright's complete integration of "Falling Water", the Kaufman house at Bear Run, into a most demanding and exciting site - to say nothing of its integration into the pattern of the Owners' life. Or was it the other way around? The elegant proportions and refined design of the Petit Trianon are shown to suit its function just as the solidity and classic simplicity of the Villa Rotunda express its more bucolic role. (Of this building Goethe noted in his diary:" never has art accomplished such a pitch of magnificence".) The whimsicalities of Abbotsford, the exuberance of the Samuel Clemens house in Hartford, and the idiosyncratic charm of Robert Louis Stevenson's Vailima are observed as expressions of the unique character of the Own ers, while the serenity of the Pazzi Chapel illustrates the ultimate aim of beauty to fit the building to its spiritual purpose.

"There is no longer any consensus about what constitues either beauty or good taste" says Mr. Rybczinski. Which is to say that beauty is in the eye of the bholder, but what about good taste? Good taste is what no-one admits to lacking but secretly enjoys noting as a deficiency in others. It may be innate or cultivated, as

severe as Shaker furniture or as flamboyant as the Sistine ceiling, molded by Berenson, or advocated by Prince Charles. Above all it is the essential quality of the apprehension of beauty and beauty, according to Keats is truth and truth, according to Milton, is as impossible to soil as a sunbeam.

On the other hand democracy guarantees equal rights to the exercise and enjoyment of bad taste. The National Endowment For The Arts, while nurturing free artistic expression, in spite of Jesse Helms, can make no judgements. So Mapplethorp's photographs and inferior paintings of Harold Washington may hang on the same gallery wall as Whistler's Mother. Television, international banking, evangelism, politics - all explore new and sordid depths of vulgarity without restraint or forbearance. (A major new offering at the 89th Toy Fair in Manhattan was "Monster Face", a life-size skull with blistering boils, nose-slime drip and quivering bugs and worms.) Thus it becomes ever more difficult to find - and, indeed, to define - beauty and good taste in the space in which we live. Rybczinski declares that "Making space is a social art. . . always part of a larger context - of a landscape, of other buildings, of a street and, finally, of our every-day lives". Could there be a more impassioned plea for the pursuit of excellence through diligent exploration of every facet of "Commoditie, Firmeness, and Delight"?

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