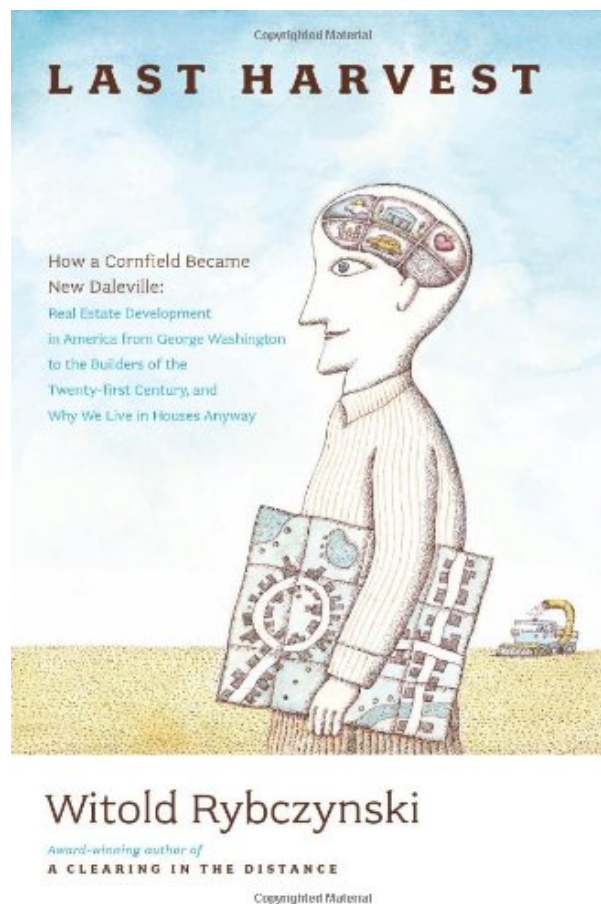


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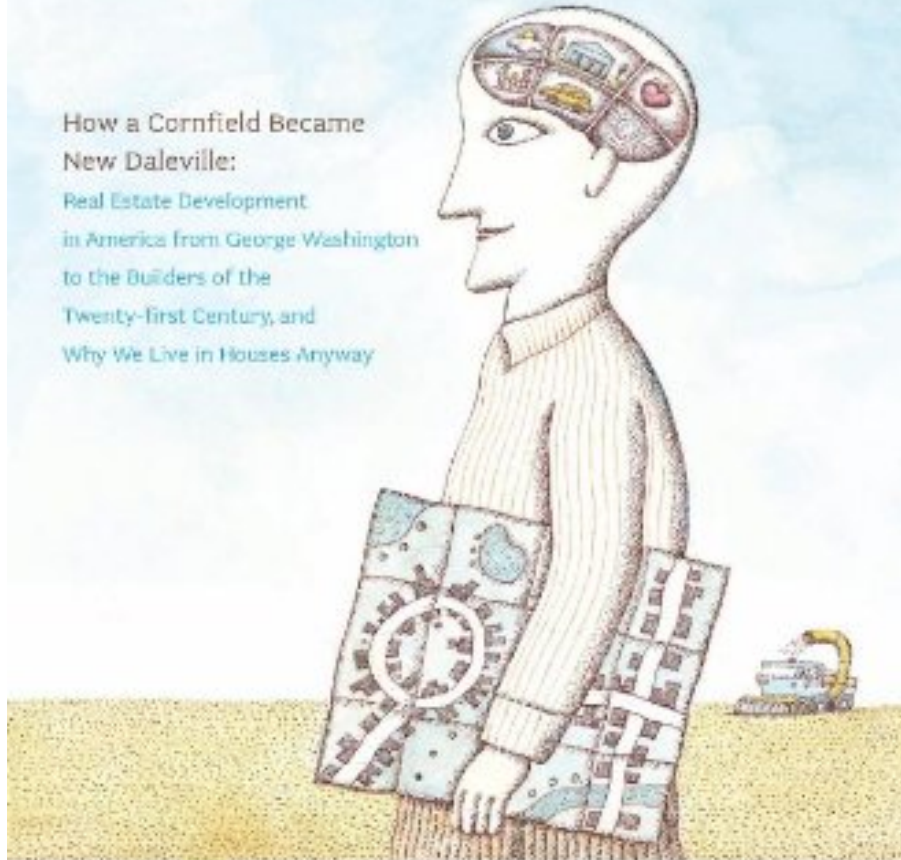
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How a Cornfield Became
New Daleville:
Real Estate Development
in America from George Washington
to the Builders of the
Twenty-first Century, and
Why We Live in Houses Anyway



Witold Rybczynski

Award-winning author of
A CLEARING IN THE DISTANCE

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When Witold Rybczynski first heard about New Daleville, it was only a developer's idea, attached to ninety acres of cornfield an hour and a half west of Philadelphia. Over the course of five years, Rybczynski met and talked to everyone involved in the building of this residential subdivision -- from the developers to the township leaders, whose approval they needed, to the home builders and engineers and, ultimately, the first families who moved in.

Always eloquent and illuminating, the award-winning author of *Now I Sit Me Down* looks at this "neotraditional" project, with its houses built close together to encourage a sense of intimacy and community, and explains the trends in American domestic architecture -- from where we place our kitchens and fences to why our bathrooms get larger every year.

Last Harvest was voted one of the ten best books of 2008 by the editors of Planetizen, and as Publishers Weekly said, "Rybczynski provides historical and cultural perspectives in a style reminiscent of Malcolm Gladwell, debunking the myth of urban sprawl and explaining American homeowners' preference for single-family dwellings."

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Features

- Witold Rybczynski
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The dirt on suburbs, exurbs, zoning, and land development

By Charles S. Houser

"The last harvest" refers to farmers who sell, and jealously covet their right to sell, portions of their farms to developers for housing developments. In his book Rybczynski, as the book's long subtitle makes clear, gives the reader a behind-the-scenes look at how one such tract of land became a neo-traditional rural development, New Daleville, Pennsylvania. Rybczynski writes in a level-headed style without any sense of alarm. There is no good guys/bad guys polarity here, just a lot of people trying to make a living (or find a decent and affordable place to live) in unpredictable economic situations without sacrificing the things they value most in community. If Rybczynski has a point of view other than that of an intelligent, informed social observer who has been writing about architecture and urban development for decades, he keeps it well in check. For readers looking for ammunition, this may be a disappointing read.

Many players are introduced--local farmers looking to sell their land, land developers, zoning boards, building contractors, banking and public officials, sanitation specialists, nearby residents, and potential buyers--but no personal profile dominates the story. They merely come in and out of view like passers-by on the much coveted sidewalks of the "village core" in one of the neotraditional garden exurbs Rybczynski describes. This superficiality made the book a little less interesting to me than his earlier books, like CITY LIFE and WAITING FOR THE WEEKEND, in which extensive historical background were provided, and left me craving more data. This kind of information is in the book (like a four page digression into the post-WWII Levittown phenomenon), it's just not as plentiful as this reader wanted. What the book did do for me, however, was to make me a little less judgmental about new subdivisions I see popping up along the interstates in what seem like strange locations and more compassionate towards the vast range of people who have to come to consensus before even the first spadeful of dirt can be turned. That anything ever gets built and that some of it is even decent looking is indeed a testament to human will and the long-standing American love affair with the single family house.

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful.

An impressive piece of work

By Peter D. Tillman

An impressive piece of work, which I read at two sittings. The review you want to read is Penelope Green's, at the New York Times -- I'll put the link in a comment, as Amazon won't allow outside links in their reviews.

Rybczynski writes a very nice portrait of the contemporary subdivision planning and building process, with the focus on a particular exurb near his home in Philadelphia. In the process, you'll learn a lot about the history of suburban living in America -- and perhaps unlearn some persistent misinformation from urban intellectuals who don't like the suburbs. Highly recommended.

Happy reading--

Peter D. Tillman

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

good journalism, so-so social science

By Michael Lewyn

When this book focuses on the story of one development in Chester County (a suburb of Philadelphia), it is quite good. It is a breezy, easy-to-read story of how one developer views the zoning process.

Some of the things I got from this book:

*Chester County's suburbanites want to limit development as much as possible. As the author notes, "New houses mean extra cars, extra traffic at rush hour, more kids in the schools, and in the long run, higher taxes."

*As a result, Chester County's zoning board tends to favor low density development; the size of an average lot in Chester County increased from half an acre in the 1960s to an acre and a half in the 1990s.

*One reason housing prices are so high is that developers have to bribe local residents to get new development approved. For example, the developer profiled in this book had to buy neighbors' support by giving away 12,500 square feet of open space.

*In Chester County, the price of land has become a greater percentage than ever of housing prices, due to (according to the developer profiled in this book) zoning-induced scarcity. In 1976, the cost of a lot represented only 15% of a Chester County house's selling price- today, the cost of land represents 30% of the sale price.

*Contrary to conventional wisdom among property rights types, homeowners' associations and the restrictive covenants they enforce are not a result of free choice among consumers. According to the developer of New Daleville, "all our projects include community associations. The local municipal governments insist on it" so that the associations (rather than municipalities) will be responsible for the costs of street maintenance.

On the other hand, the book's attempts to describe broader social trends outside Chester County are occasionally simplistic. For example, the book repeats the common chestnut that the East and West Coasts are more anti-development than the rest of the country - but doesn't supply any real evidence for this assertion.

Similarly, the book's general discussion of sprawl is a bit confused. On the one hand, it claims that there is "no significant relationship between sprawl and urban decline" - but on the other, it correctly points out that "there is no widely agreed-upon definition of sprawl". But if we don't know what sprawl is, how can we know what its results are?

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