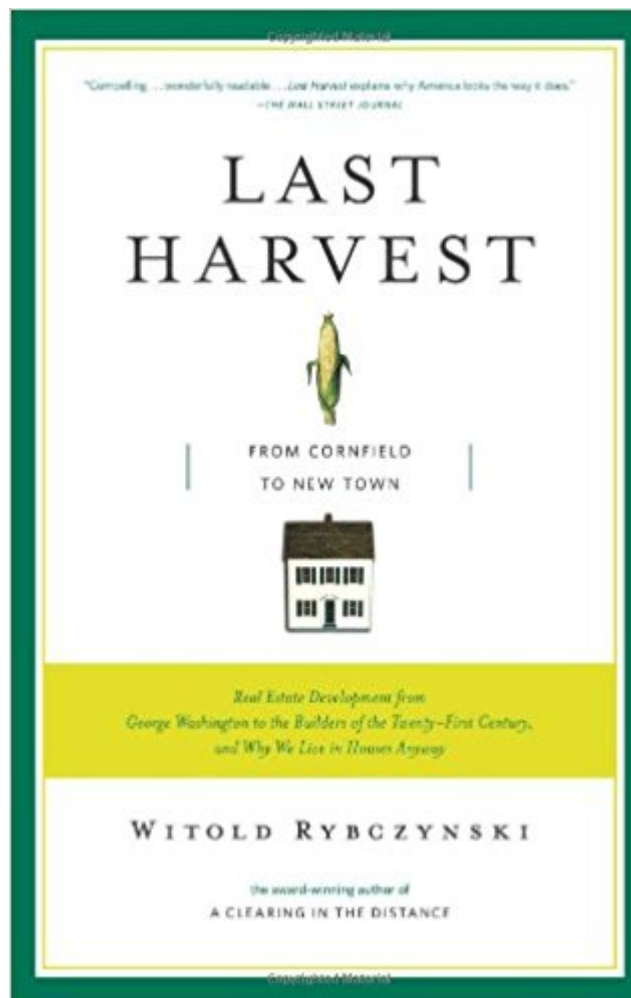


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# Last Harvest: From Cornfield To New Town: Real Estate Development From George Washington To The Builders Of The Twenty-First Century, And Why We Live In Houses Anyway





## Synopsis

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."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Architecture critic Rybczynski spent four and a half years observing the progress of New Daleville, a residential subdivision designed by one of his former students in a "neotraditional" style that builds houses close together on smaller-than-usual lots in order to foster a stronger sense of community. He is there to witness every stage of development, from the purchase of a large tract of land in rural Pennsylvania through meetings with local community leaders to get planning approval, to the

moment when a family moves into one of the first completed units. The account is forthright about the difficulties New Daleville's creators face in making the project work, but Rybczynski (*A Clearing in the Distance*, etc.) remains optimistic that "the small lots [and] narrow streets... will all make sense" in the future. Occasionally, he provides historical and cultural perspective in a style reminiscent of Malcolm Gladwell, debunking the myth of urban sprawl and explaining American homeowners' preference for single-family dwellings. But Rybczynski also excels at the "close-up," John McPhee's method of reporting, where every interview reads like an intimate conversation, and a simple walk down neighborhood sidewalks can reveal a wealth of history. This charming mixture of reportage and social criticism fits comfortably on the shelf next to David Brooks's *On Paradise Drive*. (Apr.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Residential real estate development seems like an unlikely topic for a gripping read, and certainly Rybczynski can't be said to have produced a page-turner. But the author of *The Perfect House* (2002), among other books, and an architecture critic, most recently for *Slate*, brings considerable stores of knowledge, curiosity, and writing skill to this readable and at times even suspenseful book about a developer's process of building an exurban subdivision in rural Pennsylvania. In a style that is both digressive (he reviews land development patterns as far back as George Washington's day) and leisurely (including long quotes from sources in the manner of Tracy Kidder), Rybczynski follows the project through its conceptual stages, the politically tricky zoning permits process, and community approvals, to, finally, its finished state as a neotraditional "village" community. Along the way, we learn how land gets developed in the era of the new urbanism and pro- and anti-growth debates, and why so many Americans choose to live in suburbs (as opposed to denser city centers) despite often lengthy commutes. Donna Seaman Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

If you work in a field related to real estate development, this is a great book to read. The author tracks the development of a small subdivision from initial planning to government permitting to final sales. All the while, he provides insight into the evolution of residential real estate sales in the US, and the varying perspectives of the main characters in the process. This is a great read for urban (and not-so-urban) planners. I highly recommend the book.

I've only read 6 chapters. It is a book that a professor required us to read. It reads like a novel, even

though it is full of information regarding (sub)urban planning. easy read for technical info. looking forward to other chapters.

A great book for anyone who has driven through the ex-urbs lately and wondered why and how suburban development is the way it is. A good primer for both the aspiring residential developer and the township board member.

An informative trip through the local planning process that could have been that much more useful if illustrated with site plans and building elevations. Still highly recommended.

This is a really really important book that unlocks dozens of mysteries of why we end up in the homes that we come to occupy and how communities are created from cornfields. In other hands, this could have been a tedious tract on housing economics and construction techniques, but the author is a masterful storyteller who thoroughly entranced me with an account of the birth of one modest housing development in the Philadelphia exurbs. Rybczynski clearly grasps that the essence of great drama is constant conflict, and, from nearly the first page to the last, he portrays the endless conflicts that pervade the homebuilding business: there's land developer versus the anti-development townspeople; the developer's vision of designing a pioneering new community versus the practical concern that consumers feel safer buying traditional homes; buyer versus builder in striking the deal; buyer's emotions versus buyer's practicality in concluding a home-buying decision; and so many more mini-dramas involving the dozens of other participants in the development process. As a long-time real estate professional, I learned a great deal from this book and would recommend it to everyone in the industry and to anyone who ever intends to buy a home, suburban, exurban, or even urban. It's a treasure chest of lore about the history of housing, mostly American, but also housing abroad.

"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.

Fascinating book. I found this to be a perfect supplemental read to my real estate development class.

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