

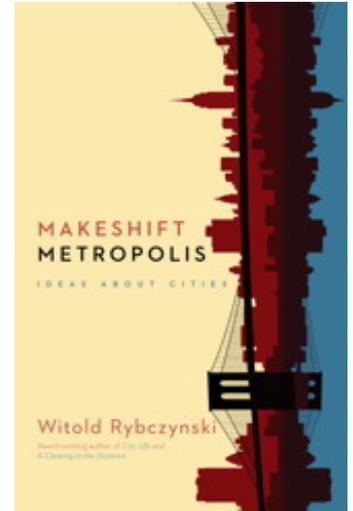
## Book Review: Makeshift Metropolis: Ideas About Cities

*Chris Gilson finds Witold Rybczynski's work to be an excellent and engaging exploration into how we might manage our urban future.*

**Makeshift Metropolis: Ideas About Cities.** Witold Rybczynski. [Simon and Schuster](#). November 2010.

It is estimated that more than 50 per cent of the world's population now live in urban areas. This marks an enormous change in human history, a history that until now has been characterised by many thousands of years of rural life. While the mass movement to cities that has occurred in the past century has undoubtedly been beneficial, for many, this alteration in how people live has led to huge social and economic problems never dreamed of in previous centuries.

Witold Rybczynski's excellent new book confronts this urban future by setting life in cities in the context of urban design from the late 19th century to the present day. With a personal, informative and engaging style, he charts previous attempts to design cities that are both efficient and liveable, and offers some possibilities of how we might manage our urban future. According to the author, urban design and planning has not been a consistent progression from one school of thought to another; rather they have tended to be a series of successful and not so successful attempts to shoehorn certain schools of thought into existing cities and regions.



Using early 21st century regeneration programmes as a framing device, Rybczynski works through the early town planning movements, covering the 'City Beautiful' movement of Charles Mulford Robinson, Ebenezer Howard's Garden Cities (a concept from which the UK later took a great deal of inspiration), Le Corbusier's incredibly ambitious plans to remake the centre of Paris into a 'Radiant City' dominated by large tower blocks, and Frank Lloyd Wright's 1930s plans for a much more decentralised urban future. Jane Jacobs' seminal work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* is also discussed at length, as one might expect in a book of this sort.

For Rybczynski, the latter half of the 20th century and the early years of this one have seen the dominance of malls and soulless 'big box' retail, as well as the rise of privately owned 'lifestyle centres' which are intended to emulate town centres but end up being more or less identikit corporate centres. This goes hand in hand with the de-industrialisation of cities – and the opening up of brownfield sites such as waterfront areas.

Rybczynski then goes on to discuss the public's desire for 'showcase architecture' which led to iconic buildings such as the Sydney Opera House and the Guggenheim Museum in Spain. This desire has led to a disconnect between the planning of spectacular buildings and urban design that ensures cities are livable; something which has caused the public's rejection of most of the plans for the development of the post 9/11 World Trade Centre site, as well as the construction of monumental but little-used buildings across the world.

In the final sections of the book, Rybczynski outlines the kind of cities we want and the kind that he thinks that we need. Cities are becoming more dispersed, more decentralized, and smaller. Yes, more people live in cities now, but people are keen on *smaller* cities. This desire for smaller cities is linked with the desire by residents to live in 'face to face' places. And this is a good thing too – energy prices will rise in years to come, and this will benefit smaller, denser cities.

While the book does delve into the effects of increasing energy prices, Rybczynski seems reluctant to 'give up' the car. While he does say that public transport use will increase, that is only alongside the point of increasing car pooling and a growth in the number of more fuel efficient cars. It would have been more ambitious (and sustainable) to have called for greater investment in public transport, especially in the USA where it is less established than in Europe and the UK. Instead, Rybczynski dismisses the European model as being difficult to implement in the USA, and instead points to an Israeli example of how a new community can be beneficial. While the example is an interesting one, it is not terribly helpful to city planners who are stuck with historic cities and historic problems.

The book is very much focused on the USA, although Rybczynski does drop in the occasional reference to the UK, France and Israel, and this does make it seem like he feels that urban planning in the USA is far

more important than anywhere else, and that the world's urban future is very much an American one. Perhaps it is this America-centric view that also informs his affinity for planned urbanism and new cities. Rybczynski feels that new cities have advantages, citing more streamlined building regulations and greater affordability. But the heterogeneity of older cities such as London can often be a hotbed for innovation, and varying planning regimes over history make for an eclectic mix of public spaces and buildings.

Discussions about urban problems also do seem to be largely absent from the book. While the extensive discussion of how to build new cities, and to build them well, is an important one, crime and social inequality are recurrent problems for almost every city. Many people are unable to live in new cities and districts that are largely planned. Even a short discussion on the polarisation of urban inequality and how the urban planning in the future might deal with this would have made an already good book even more worth reading.

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