



The Language of Houses

Alison Lurie

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In 1981 Alison Lurie published *The Language of Clothes*, a meditation on costume and fashion as an expression of history, social status and individual psychology. Amusing, enlightening and full of literary allusion, the book was highly praised and widely anthologized.

Now Lurie has returned with a companion book, *The Language of Houses*, a lucid, provocative and entertaining look at how the architecture of buildings and the spaces within them both reflect and affect the people who inhabit them. Schools, churches, government buildings, museums, prisons, hospitals, restaurants, and of course, houses and apartments—all of them speak to human experience in vital and varied ways.

The Language of Houses discusses historical and regional styles and the use of materials such as stone and wood and concrete, as well as contemplating the roles of stairs and mirrors, windows and doors, tiny rooms and cathedral-like expanses, illustrating its conclusions with illuminating literary references and the comments of experts in the field.

Accompanied by lighthearted original drawings, *The Language of Houses* is an essential and highly entertaining new contribution to the literature of modern architecture.

The Language of Houses Details

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Author : Alison Lurie

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From Reader Review The Language of Houses for online ebook

Kirsti says

"The house contains the home but is not identical with it. The house anticipates the home and will very likely survive it." --Joyce Carol Oates

Elegantly written assessments of different types of architecture -- not only of houses but also of museums, mental hospitals, banks, churches, schools, restaurants, and stores.

Lurie's opinions are entertaining. For instance, the Immaculate Heart of Mary church in Windthorst, Kansas, "has the look of a prim and disapproving pioneer aunt," while St. Boniface's church in Menominee, Nebraska, "strongly resembles a frightened puppy." See for yourself at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immacula...> and <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Fil...> . Duke Chapel, on the other hand, "looks almost brand-new, as if it had been created yesterday by supernatural forces." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Duke_Chapel

Interesting observations about how the space and lighting accorded to an object tell us how valuable that object is, whether it's a Rembrandt etching or an expensive sweater.

Minus one star for having no index.

Chris says

Disclaimer: ARC read via Netgalley.

The Philadelphia School System has closed a few schools in the last couple years. This is due to largely to cost cutting issues in regards to not having enough money. The reasons for the lack of money are vast but can pretty much be summed up by the following statement – “Inner city schools, and Philadelphia should secede from the state of PA”. There was much discussion and attempts to save some of those schools (especially those that had special programs that exposed inner city children to things they weren’t normally see such as wildlife) as well as the fact that the remaining schools would be over crowded and unstaffed. Several people wondered what would happen to the closed buildings. More than one person simply stated they should be turned into prisons because if you are not educating a population, you are telling them crime is a good option.

But the suggestion of a jail is more apt than many people would think at first. Read this book and you will know why. After all, in her book about buildings and what their style tells prospective owners, visitors, and users.

Windows are far more important than you think, and not just in schools.

Though the design of school says rather much, and at least today none of it really good.

Brick means more than you think.

Lurie looks at all aspects of the building, not just material and purpose, but also by design. She answers the question why are rooms square or rectangular, for instance. More importantly, she writes in such a way that reader does not need a background in architecture or design to read the book. Lurie's focus is on the effect such buildings have on people but also what they say about people. This translates not only to male and female but also class. There is much about how buildings influence and reflect people as well as how people see living space. The most poignant example coming in Lurie's discussion about the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the destruction of New Orleans.

The book is divided, roughly, into different types of buildings from private homes to schools to office buildings to museums. Different cities are looked at. The ARC I receive didn't have photos, and photos in some cases would have made the book better. Lurie does mention mostly well known buildings but in many cases, a photo would have given a clear impression. There are funny sketches before each chapter.

Christina Gagliano says

Some interesting tidbits but, considering the highly subjective nature of this topic, the style is a bit too snarky.

Ja says

As I was reading, I increasingly hated the tone and style of the book. When trying to put the feeling to words, I finally came up with this assessment: The book is actually just pages of basic observations and very little data or references to support the claims. Here's an example: "Trees make the home look more attractive, but only up to a point." The remaining paragraph following that statement weakly supports the statement with hearsay presented as truth: "Realtors have said..." And "Interviewers report..." With other points made, there are occasional direct references to other writers, but they all tend to have a line or short paragraph from their texts. These quotes, seemingly, are used as further evidence for the argument, but ultimately comes off as just a way of showing that the author had done some research.

It became so bad that I ended up skimming the rest of the book from Chapter 3 on, hoping that at some point a deeper analysis or insight into the psychological responses of architecture would emerge. Unfortunately, I just kept reading the same kind of surface observations. There were moments of interest during the religious and confinement buildings chapters but by the end of it, I'm glad I made the decision to skim.

I looked at other reviews of this book as I was writing this to see if anyone shared my distress and I was a little surprised to see all the positive reviews. I was trained as an architect so I think that's why I'm having such a negative reaction, but I honestly feel like I would have enjoyed the book more if it was just completely illustrated with arrows pointing out her thoughts.

A way I can see this book being really meaningful is if you didn't grow up in the US and are not familiar with how architecture speaks to people there. There are some mentions of international buildings/styles, but very few and any direct references are kept just to the more popular and famous ones.

With all that being said, if you're someone that has never thought about how architecture influences the way you feel, or has never spent much time in the US, then maybe you should check out this book... but perhaps

just out of the library.

Sally Ewan says

Lurie goes through a variety of buildings--not only houses, but also churches, prisons, old age homes, stores, etc. She talks about the things that we sense but may not be aware of, such as the effects of windows, ceiling height, positioning of rooms and objects, and how they affect us. I liked the way she presented the information. A pleasant read.

Jill Meyer says

Alison Lurie has written a book, "The Language of Houses", on a subject that nearly everyone has an opinion - the way we see both "personal" architecture (our homes) and "public" architecture (the other buildings we encounter in our lives). It is an interesting, if not a bit bland, look at architecture.

I really think we all have reactions to the spaces we're in - either temporarily (a public building or another person's home) or more lengthy (our own homes). Mostly these feelings are transient - we either like and feel comfortable in the space we're in...or we don't. And if we don't, we often try to leave as soon as possible. This was an important "jumping off point" for me when I began this book, and I read the entire book without receiving much in the way of that, despite the book's subtitle: "How Buildings Speak to Us".

Ms Lurie does an excellent job at looking at the history of buildings and how they're constructed. She covers home styles as they've evolved from one room domains to modern homes with a room for everybody in the family. But she doesn't say much about how these homes affect the families that live within. I'm a compulsive viewer of house plans and love to consider how I could use the house as a home, while also thinking about how others could use it. Lurie writes a bit on how the modern home has moved from being filled with smallish rooms into designs with a lot of open spaces - the country kitchen, the second floor that opens up over the first floor, etc. She also examines how public buildings have evolved.

Okay, one thing a decent reviewer of a book should NOT do is to bemoan what the author does NOT include in her book. And that's what I'm doing here. I would have loved for more opinions from Ms Lurie; I wanted some "spice". I'd have liked to see her flay those architects (and the committees who approved their designs) for buildings like Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin which is a completely unusable home for a museum. Now, again, that's MY - violent - opinion. Many people love that building.

So Alison Lurie has written a very good book about this history of our buildings. It's interesting reading and can heartily recommend it to the reader who wants the facts without the opinions.

EThayer3 says

I love houses so when I saw a review of this book in my local paper I knew I had to read it. We get a good overview and history of houses, how they have changed and grown over the years, what our houses say

about us, talk about individual rooms, etc. The last third or so of the book discusses about other types of buildings - hospitals, prisons, doctor's offices, work buildings, nursing homes, schools, colleges. I had to skim through a good part of this as my due date (that is for the library, not baby) was too fast approaching.

Overall the book was informative and interesting but seemed to be a lot of the author's opinions as opposed to real facts.

Margaret Sankey says

Particularly useful in light of the McMansion/Zillow flap, this is a meditation on how people interact with architecture--whether a public building is designed to look orderly and rational, or off-limits and off-putting, how shops can be designed to make you linger or rush out with your fries, why certain homes seem warm while others are stage sets for furniture. None of this is ground-breaking or surprising, but it is useful to have someone spell out what you get the sense of as an amateur observer.

J says

The concept is appealing and in some instances the comparison/contrast of buildings for different purposes was interesting. Most was just very basic.

She pointed building variations due to the difference in available materials which is pretty obvious in sod houses versus wood frame. For me it was a bit more interesting to realize that the Guggenheim and Sydney Opera House relied on recent technology.

I did learn a reason for barns being painted red.

Even though the book is only a few years old, the examples she used of shopping centers were totally enclosed, anchored by major department stores. Many of those edifices are now empty, in decline or used for other purposes.

Perhaps the book was published too early to address the hotels that are designed to appeal to millennials.

John says

I'm going to bail on the audiobook after a couple of hours; the urge to skim is just too great. Perhaps I'll tackle the print version another time, as the material itself isn't "dense" exactly, so much as ... I dunno ... monotonous in audio, despite the narrator's effort.

Sarah Beth says

This work of non-fiction explores the effect building structure and style has on us and what that structure says about its inhabitants. Lurie explores both the inside and outside of homes, churches, museums, schools, prisons, hospitals, hotels, restaurants, stores, and offices. The focus is primarily on western architecture.

I have read other books that focus on the home and its evolution and function, including *Inside the Victorian*

Home by Judith Flanders and *At Home* by Bill Bryson. Unfortunately this book greatly disappointed me. Rather than providing illuminating insight into the psychology behind why our domestic spheres appear the way they do or the impact our surroundings have on us, this felt like a long-winded personal reflection from Lurie with very limited research or facts to buttress her claims. Furthermore, many of Lurie's observations felt like obvious points that hardly necessitate a book. For example, "a small house suggests a small income; just as a small church suggests a small congregation and a small store a limited number of customers" (13). Or her description of the objects on display in our homes, "These rugs and sculptures and vases may have been directly inherited, or may simply have been purchased to serve as symbols of origin" (95). At times, the simplistic observations made it feel as if I was reading a manual that had been written for someone new and totally unfamiliar with structures of the western world.

Additionally, I was surprised that so much of the book didn't actually deal with homes at all, making the title a bit of a misnomer. In fact, at least half of the book is devoted to the author's observations of other types of structures including nursing homes and schools. It also included various segue ways such as a detailed description of the exploitation of prisoners for cheap labor, which didn't really have anything to do with the prison as a building at all.

Lurie did share some interesting points, such as revealing just how much the average square footage of the American home has expanded since 1950, just as the size of the average American has also increased. This increased girth has also made large, oversized furniture popular to accommodate our obese frames. It was also interesting to read that the more closely a house resembles those nearby, the "more friendly the neighbors will be" (78). Thus why it's unwise to buy the largest house on the street.

Candy Hudziak says

She explained very obvious things as though they were revelatory. Big fancy buildings are meant to awe and inspire people?! Whaaaat??

Rose says

What an interesting and different take on how buildings influence what we think about architecture and the people who live and work in various types and styles of buildings. The author covers dwellings as well as business, places of worship, school rooms and restaurants and bars. Thought provoking as well as informative. (The current craze for double-height "great rooms" also saves the builders a considerable amount by reducing the area of second level floors).

Rebecca says

The author discusses what various forms of architecture and spaces says about people, and how people react to those forms. She covers houses, hospitals, hotels, offices, churches, schools, theaters, jails, and more. She only covers western architecture, primarily England, with some America.

The second half of this book was better than the first, with more backing information and quotes to show that the author had done research. In the first part, largely about houses or summaries of general topics, it felt as

if the author were merely sketching out her personal thoughts in essay form; it felt insubstantial and personal, rather than authoritative. When it comes to houses, she treated the single family, suburban, middle-class home as the norm, and that felt really uncomfortable to me. Many people do come from that background, but many more do not, and to present that one form as the norm felt presumptuous and dismissive. So while I did find much of interest here, it wasn't broad enough for me.

Roxy says

Informative. Didn't appeal to me as much as *The Language of Clothes*, but I'm still glad I read it.
