

FURNISHING THE MIND

[by John H. Lienhard](#)

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Today, we furnish a Medieval home, and we alter human consciousness. The University of Houston's College of Engineering presents this series about the machines that make our civilization run, and the people whose ingenuity created them.

Witold Rybczynski makes a surprising metaphor of Medieval home life. He reminds us not to try to hammer another age into the mold of our own lives. Rather, to see Medieval life through Medieval eyes is to learn about ourselves, as well.

We have plenty of records of Medieval home life. We know the size of houses and rooms. Pictures show how they were furnished. We know what people ate -- how they bathed, slept, and cleaned. We know about sewage management and etiquette

Of course what we know best is life among the moneyed upper class who left written records. That was far enough from our own idea of home life. The poor, of course, only survived in an existence without the remotest amenities.

Two of our words were absent in the Medieval vocabulary -- comfort and privacy. To comfort was to strengthen or to console. It carried no sense of physical comfort or coziness. The Holy Spirit was called the comforter, not because he brought ease into your life, but because he strengthened you against a hard world.

The privacy we enjoy was unknown, even in the wealthiest houses. One room held several beds. One bed slept several people. Bathing was communal. A chamber pot might be used in any room.

All that meant a complex, rigidly obeyed, set of manners. All kinds of things were prescribed -- where you sat at table, the clothes you wore. It took manners to make life tolerable at such close quarters. It was like the crowded Japanese, who appropriate an English word to express the alien concept of privacy. Their word is *praihashii*.

Furniture was sparse in a Medieval household, and it wasn't meant for comfort. You sat on a bench to eat. Chairs were few and uncomfortable. They were no more than symbols of authority. The comfortable clutter of my study, with its books, pictures, and personal mementos, was unknown in Medieval times. Life lay out in the external world. And here Rybczynski startles us.

Private furniture, he says, reflects a private internal world. We didn't really add that to our houses until we began refurnishing the mind with private concepts like self-esteem,

melancholy, and sentiment. We adopted those words only after we privatized our furniture -- and our life indoors.

And there's the oldest lesson of technology. We shape ourselves around the things we make. We cannot really know which came first. But, in the Renaissance, specialized rooms for private functions come into being. And so did a wholly new sense of the individual -- and his interior power to shape the world around him.

I'm John Lienhard, at the University of Houston, where we're interested in the way inventive minds work.

(Theme music)

Rybczynski, W., *Home: A Short History of an Idea*. New York: Penguin Books, 1986.

A Medieval Home Companion: Housekeeping in the Fourteenth Century (trans. and ed. by Tania Bayard). New York: Harper Collins, 1991.

See also Engines Episode No. [800](#) (based on the second reference above. It also deals with Medieval home life.) I'm grateful to Judy Myers, UH Library, for recommending the Rybczynski reference and making it available to me.

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