Where we live

A breezy look at Canadian housing

The Canadian Home
From Cave to Electronic Cocoon
By Marc Denhez
Dundurn Press, 256 pp, $39.99

ANNMARIE ADAMS
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

There's no place like home. This age-old maxim is particularly true of Canadian domestic architecture, which has inspired surprisingly little investigation, despite the fact that houses have figured prominently in every aspect of life in Canada since humans first sought shelter here about 20,000 years ago. Marc Denhez's survey of Canadian homes thus bears an inordinate amount of responsibility as the sole book on this important topic.

His is a popular, rather than academic, look at the history of Canadian housing, with an introduction by Pierre Berton. It draws heavily on the family of highly accessible books on domestic architecture which have appeared since the early 1980s, such as Witold Rybczynski's Home (1986) and Tom Wolfe's From Bauhaus to Our House (1981). Indeed, The Canadian Home takes as its point of departure Rybczynski's now-famous analogy of domestic comfort and the multi-layered structure of an onion. A good part of the remaining 15 chapters is a direct conversation with the former McGill professor of architecture.

Montreal homes near Park Ave.: the exterior staircases are typical of this city.

And like all attempts at pop history, the book will delight some and may offend others. The author's writing style is unfortunately often flippant, and full of dismissals and misplaced attempts at humor. Throughout the book, images of middle-class pop culture are used as frameworks through which the architecture of others is judged. Imagine the reactions of West Coast Indians in reading their housing was "singularly focused on partying" or that of French-Canadians in reading their ancestors' use of cladding was like Archie Bunker's fondness for aluminum siding.

The unique plaster-like substance used in Quebec to protect masonry walls, crepi, is described in the book as "goop" and "pastry." This statement is typical of the author's misrepresentation of complex architectural technologies, terms and concepts.

Women readers in particular might question why architects are always generically cited as "he," despite the fact that women have been members of the architectural profession in Canada since 1920.

The book's strength is in its interpretation of the complex interaction of various Canadian interest groups, particularly the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp. and the Canadian Home Builders' Association, which supported the project. Also commendable is the Ottawa author's broad definition of housing: his story encompasses domestic environments as wide-ranging as prehistoric caves, stately mansions, rooming houses, mobile homes, temporary wartime dwellings and Canadian houses which have appeared in Hollywood movies.

Let's hope that this light-hearted book – presumably intended to entertain – will inspire more research on the history of our homes.

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When the Grim Reaper calls

There's no getting around it – death's no fun

How We Die
Reflections on Life's Final Chapter
By Sherwin B. Nuland
Knopf, 278 pp, $31.50

MONIQUE POLAK
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

The news isn't pretty. According to Sherwin Nuland, human death is painful and ugly. In How We Die, Nuland systematically destroys the myth of dignified death. Nuland should know: a respected surgeon and Yale medical professor, he's all too familiar with death's face.

Though Nuland's clinical analysis of six common and often fatal medical conditions makes for bleak reading, his work is useful. A doctor committed to patients' right to know medical truths, Nuland is convinced that "Accurate knowledge of how a disease kills serves to free us from unnecessary terrors."

In his opening chapter, Nuland recalls the death of a patient suffering from coronary heart disease, the leading cause of death in industrialized nations. His description of the patient who "threw back his head . . . with the glassy, unseeing gaze of open dead eyes, roared out . . . a dreadful rasping whoop" echoes the unflinchingly detail of Edgar Allan Poe's horror stories. A subsequent chapter, complete with diagrams, explains the functioning and breakdown of the heart.

Though Nuland admits it's "not politically correct to admit that some people die of old age," he chronicles the physical deterioration accompanying the passage of time. Like machines, our bodies corrode. His account of Alzheimer's disease, which strikes 11 per cent of Americans over age 65, is particularly sad. He shares the case of Phil whose condition manifests itself in outbursts of anger and forgetfulness. "Since when," Phil asks his wife confusedly when he awakens in the middle of night, "does a sister sleep with her brother?" Later, Phil forgets how to chew, and later still, his own name. Nuland stresses the psychological trauma experienced by the families of Alzheimer's victims. An Alzheimer family's only consolation is the victim's unawareness of his condition.

In a chapter on AIDS, the human immunodeficiency virus, Nuland describes the harrowing death of Ishmael, an intravenous-drug user. Nuland details Kaposi's sarcoma, a cancer frequently seen in AIDS victims, as well as the uncontrollable diarrhea common during the final months. Here, too, the importance of a support group is stressed, what Dr. Alvin Novick, an American AIDS activist, calls "the caregiving surround."

Nuland's chapters on cancer lead to him to reflect on the limitations of medicine. He finds that sometimes "hope should be redefined," citing cases where medical intervention is futile. Though Nuland apologizes for "burdening these pages with . . . autobiography," these chapters are especially poignant and effective. Nuland recounts his own brother's bout with intestinal cancer. We sense the author's guilt over having recommended an experimental drug therapy program for his ailing brother, whose suffering was prolonged before his inevitable death.

Nuland is clearly a doctor capable of writing more than prescriptions. His work is full of literary allusions, ranging from Shakespeare to Montaigne to Lewis Carroll. Frequently, however, the writing is overdone. He describes the medical battle against heart disease as the "paradoxical partnering of human grief and grim clinical determination to win that actuates the urgencies swarming through the mind of every impassioned combatant."

Brave readers undaunted by this book's grim contents will emerge with a clearer understanding of death. Death, as Nuland reminds us, is part of the natural order. Meaning and hope reside in our daily lives, for, according to Nuland, "Who has lived in dignity, dies in dignity." One of Nuland's cancer patients' words are even more blunt: "You have to live before you die."

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