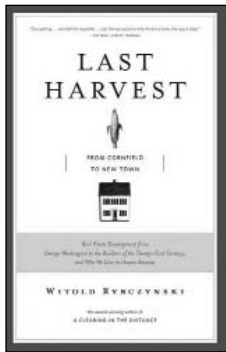


RECOMMENDED READING

# Last Harvest: How a Cornfield Became New Daleville

by Witold Rybczynski (April 2007, Scribner, 308 pages)

REVIEWED BY PETER HOLLAND, CRE



I AM CERTAIN THAT VIRTUALLY EVERY member of The Counselors of Real Estate has an active level of curiosity for the real estate projects we all observe in our professional and day-to-day lives. While a tailor may observe a fine fabric, the orthodontist a smile, we look at buildings and real estate developments and pass our own judgment. If you are like me,

you often ask “why?” Why, and how was this built, or too often, “what were they thinking?” We have seen good and bad concepts in good and bad locations, and in recent years we have seen a rush to overdevelop residential properties be they in high-rise condominiums, in lifestyle communities or in so-called “exurbia”—areas distant from traditional suburbs and CBDs. Witold Rybczynski, who teaches at the School of Design at the University of Pennsylvania, answers our questions as he describes one exurban development in his new book *Last Harvest: How a Cornfield Became New Daleville*. The story of New Daleville is of interest itself, but Rybczynski adroitly draws in historical and comparative residential development references from Philadelphia’s Chestnut Hill, to Mariemont, Ohio, and on to Celebration, Florida. Having read Rybczynski’s earlier book on the landscape designer Frederick Law Olmstead, I looked forward to this new work. *A Clearing in the Distance* was a readable, but serious book on an influential man. By comparison, *Last Harvest* is a good book, and while an interesting recounting of the development process, it lacks the

gravitas, research and scholarship evidenced in the very high standard set by *A Clearing in the Distance*.

This is not to suggest, however, that it does not merit a read, and indeed it is an easy read, suitable for the next transcontinental flight or summer vacation. I do extend kudos for Rybczynski’s good use of references and sources, and I found the index useful. Counselors who are engaged in the development process in general, and residential development in particular, will especially enjoy those moments of knowing recognition as the author describes the Gordian knots of development. After all, we are often engaged to unravel those very same knots. Rybczynski does us a particular service in that he weaves together the development process as it occurs, and as it occurs over a long period of time. This approach affords us new insights as we see development from many perspectives—that of the homeowner, the landowner, the builder, the civic official, and so on. It is instructive to see a different perspective on something we otherwise know well and that is close to our

## About the Columnist



**Peter Holland, CRE**, is a principal with the Hartford, Connecticut-based real estate advisory firm of Bartram & Cochran. Previously, he served as COO and CFO of CoreNet Global, where he formed part of the thought leadership of the profession and had day-to-day responsibility for the strategic direction, finances and operations of the organization. Holland has more than 25 years of consulting Fortune 100 and not-for-profit experience in the field of real estate.

## Last Harvest: How a Cornfield Became New Daleville

professional lives. Rybczynski excels at integrating the complexities of the development process for the reader. He describes and informs in a way that anyone who reads *The New Yorker* or *The Atlantic* will recognize.

At least until recently, America has been besotted with residential development (on that topic I would also recommend *House Lust* by Daniel McGinn), and in our predictable if not regrettable fashion, we have achieved nothing less than a worldwide financial crisis with our zeal. The story, however, has not yet been fully told. This observer, for one, does not believe that long term, investors and homeowners will abandon their fascination with residential real estate. Markets will adjust, the economy will recover and interest in home ownership will resume. And resume it will in new ways and in new places, ensuring that the story Rybczynski illustrates with New Daleville will continue. *Last Harvest* is a valuable book for today, but also one to keep and take off the shelf in the future. ■