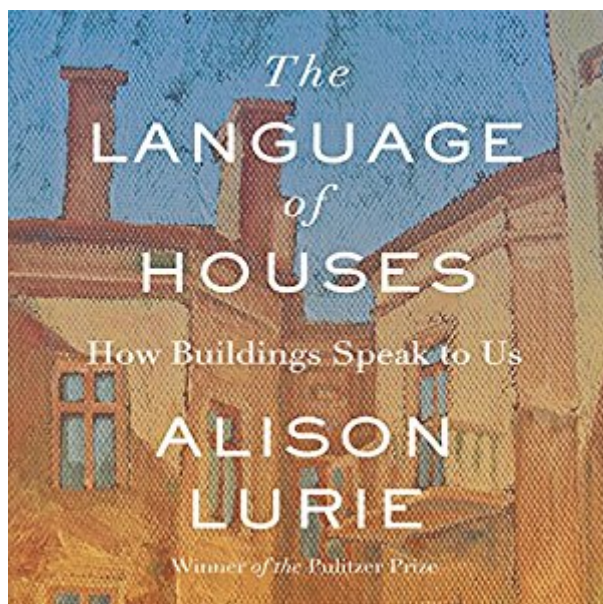


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# The Language Of Houses



## Synopsis

In the 1980's, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Alison Lurie wrote a meditation on clothing as an expression of history, social status and individual psychology. *The Language of Clothes* came to be highly regarded in the literature of couture and design. Lurie has returned with *The Language of Houses*, a provocative and entertaining journey through the architecture of houses and buildings and the divided spaces within come to reflect the attitudes and purposes of the organizations and people who inhabit them. What makes a house is in the eye of the beholder, and the word can mean anything from church to office to domicile and more and relies on the use of materials such as stone and wood and stucco and the roles of stairs and windows, tight interiors and open expanses. Structures under scrutiny include schools, churches, government buildings, museums, prisons, hospitals, restaurants, and of course, houses and homes. Filled with literary references from Kafka to Hawthorne and charming hand-drawings by Karen Chen, Lurie's new work is an essential and highly entertaining new contribution to the literature of buildings and architecture.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

If I say the word house, what comes to mind? Probably a place where a person or a family lives. Unhappily, Lurie seems to think that this word encompasses every sort of building, from museums to your office cubicle. That could be why she spends almost 60% of the book on them. So what you & I mean by "house" is not the focus of the book. That's the first problem. The second problem is the book shows Lurie's prejudices as a boarding-school-educated New Yorker because

she doesn't like: housing developments, commerce, overweight people, or folks who live in the West. Rarely does she talk about architectural styles of the West. She has little but contempt for the tastes of the middle class, verbally sneering at sectionals and overstuffed recliners. That wouldn't be quite so bad if she didn't show a lack of research about many things. While she's quick to identify several styles of churches, she seems completely unaware of many significant styles of churches, something easily remedied. When talking about housing developments, which she obviously dislikes, she completely ignores two highly significant historical, architectural and social movements that lead to our current state: the rise of bungalows in the first half of the 20th Century, and the explosion of suburbia after World War II. Both these developments importantly led to our current ideas about houses and the dream of home ownership. And, importantly, the trends made these things possible not for just the middle class, but for the working class, a group of people Lurie ignores. To make matters worse, her supposed analysis is all on the surface.

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".

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