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The Barefoot Architect



Synopsis

A former UN worker and prominent architect, Johan van Lengen has seen firsthand the desperate need for a "greener" approach to housing in impoverished tropical climates. This comprehensive book clearly explains every aspect of this endeavor, including design (siting, orientation, climate consideration), materials (sisal, cactus, bamboo, earth), and implementation. The author emphasizes throughout the book what is inexpensive and sustainable. Included are sections discussing urban planning, small-scale energy production, cleaning and storing drinking water, and dealing with septic waste, and all information is applied to three distinct tropical regions: humid areas, temperate areas, and desert climates. Hundreds of explanatory drawings by van Lengen allow even novice builders to get started.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is the first English translation of *The Barefoot Architect* (TBA), which was originally written in Spanish in Mexico in 1982. Obviously written with a Third-World audience in mind, TBA nevertheless has a multitude of useful ideas that could be incorporated into North American buildings. At first glance this handbook's 697 pages are intimidating, but fear not - this tome is extremely user-friendly, as it employs only simple drawings and brief text to convey a wealth of handy ideas for laymen/owner builders and professional contractors alike. The only exception to that last statement is that TBA has a rather skimpy index. TBA starts off with a thoughtful design overview which shows how to situate your house, say, to take advantage of the prevailing winds,

solar orientation, terrain, and vegetation on your building site. Subsequent chapters cover considerations and methods for building in deserts, jungles, and temperate zones. Granted, not many Norte Americanos will want to build their homes with bamboo, thatch or handmade adobe bricks, but there are plenty of examples of materials and construction techniques that I wouldn't hesitate to use where I live in Northwest Wyoming. The use of modern insulating, siding, and roofing materials that would be familiar and available to Americans is little discussed. Remember that the primary audience for this handbook resides not in North America/First World, but in the southern hemisphere, where most citizens don't have our economic wherewithal. I would not use a lot of TBA's suggestions in the building of my primary residence, but for outbuildings, walls, gardens, get-away cabins, etc., I would use this book in a heartbeat for my construction bible. Thoreau would have loved it.

This is the first English edition of a book originally written in Spanish, published in the 1980's and distributed widely in Mexico and throughout Latin America. Shelter Publications made this new edition available in 2008 because of the relevance of the content to our current times. A massive paperback of about 700 pages, *The Barefoot Architect* could almost be considered a complete compendium of indigenous building techniques from Latin America. Van Lengen's approach to explaining the concepts presented is extremely graphic, so the book is full of thousands of hand-drawn images, and these images really help convey the subtleties of designs and ideas. At the outset the reader is given the basics of how to design a house, along with the fundamentals of drawing plans. The constant objective is to provide the tools for people to come up with their own plans based on the guidelines outlined in the book. In designing a house, the local climate will determine many aspect of what is appropriate. To help emphasize this van Lengen divides climate zones into "humid tropical," "dry tropical" and "temperate" zones. Most of the strategies presented for "temperate" zones are applicable to building in North America and Europe, although these regions could benefit from a greater emphasis on insulation. Guidelines are given for choosing a site based on environmental considerations in order to provide sufficient ventilation, light, heat, drainage, etc. The recommendations go beyond single residential development, with public or commercial buildings and whole communities embraced; this is also a book about urban or village planning to some extent. Each climate zone is examined in detail according to what house shapes and design elements are appropriate.

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