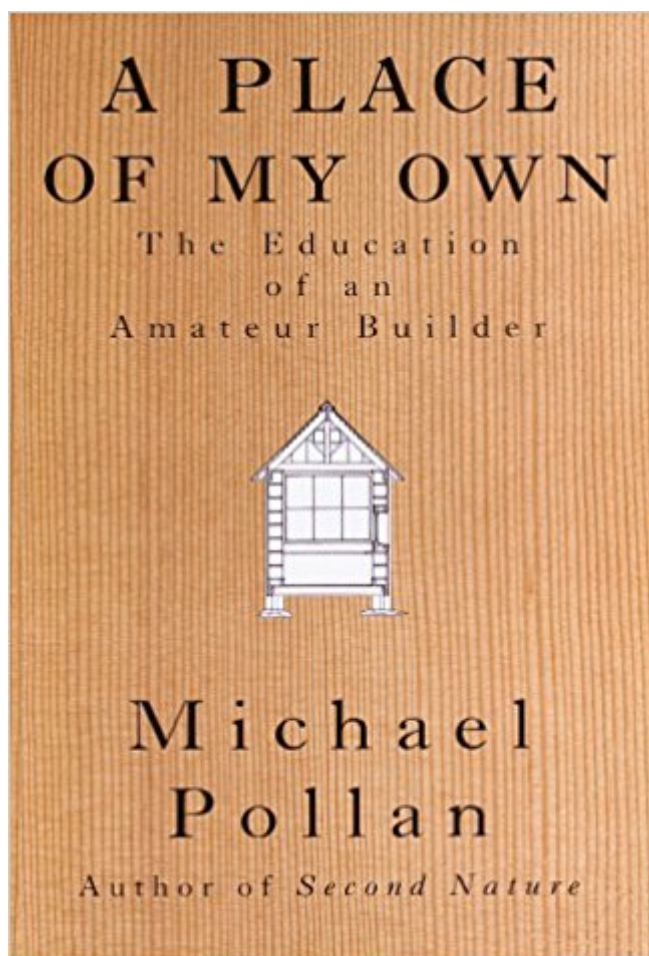


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# A Place Of My Own: The Education Of An Amateur Builder



## Synopsis

At a turning point in his life, writer Michael Pollan found himself dreaming of a small wood-frame hut in the woods near his house--a place to work, but also a "shelter for daydreams." Weaving the practical with the philosophical, this book presents a captivating personal inquiry into the art of architecture, the craft of building, and the meaning of modern work. Line drawings throughout. Size C. 320 pp. National ads & publicity. 35,000 print.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Michael Pollan's *A Place of My Own* might be suspiciously viewed by some readers as a text begging for interpretation. What is it that causes this man at midlife to attempt to put up a structure, an actual wood and concrete dwelling, where he can work on his own craft away from his domestic life? Arguably, Pollan's intentions are more transparent than a too clever postmodern audience can easily appreciate. The author of this fine, well-crafted book offers an explanation that seems honest and understandable: "Whenever I heard myself described as an 'information service worker' or a 'symbolic analyst,' I wanted to reach for a hammer, or a hoe, and with it make something less virtual than a sentence." In Pollan's bestselling book *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*, he illustrated his facility with both hoe and pen. In *A Place of My Own* he hefts the hammer and again records with great intelligence how thoroughly thought and reflection can be woven into our common lives and the patterns of a day's work. His book's subtitle, "An Education of an Amateur Builder," captures much of what this book contains: the lessons learned by a diligent student of

architecture, design, and construction. The writing contains no gaps or unsightly seams, and it's full of clues to readers who share a similar desire to build something tangible in a world that prizes the evanescent.

Wanting to have a place of his own where he could think and write, Pollan decided to erect a small structure in the woods behind his house. Fancying himself a modern-day Thoreau, he wanted to build his "dream hut" with his own hands, even though he had no carpentry skills or experience. We learn very little about how to build a small structure; the majority of this book is devoted to Pollan's pretentious musings about a variety of architectural theories and about his interaction with the architect and carpenter who helped him (wasn't this supposed to be a simple structure?). Although it cost Pollan \$125 per square foot and took him two and one-half years to build, ultimately it is the reader who works the hardest. Libraries serving those with a strong interest in architecture will want this title; other libraries should skip this book. ?Jonathan Hershey, Akron-Summit Cty. P.L., OhioCopyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Despite being a big fan of Transcendentalism in theory, I've struggled to read *Walden* and hoped this book would be my modern version. Perhaps more my fault than the author's, I was expecting a literal tale of building interwoven with a more general discourse on building and nature. There's certainly some of that present in this book, but there's also a lot of talk on architecture and its movement and meanings. A lot. I consider myself a bit of an information sponge and love learning about a variety of topics, but I found this very dry. I often wished the discussions of architecture included basic drawings the same way some of the construction detail sections do, so that perhaps I'd have some concrete idea what he was referring to. This is a very "writerly", head in the clouds, theoretical take on a subject, and for me it was just too abstract. Pollan is at his best in this book when describing people. He brings his carpenter and his architect to vivid life and imbues a real sense of humor into his work with, and challenge between, each of them. The segment about how all roads lead to gun control with carpenter Joe is without a doubt my favorite few pages in the book. The details of construction and his reverence for his materials are engaging and understandable, despite my lack of familiarity with the subject. All told, this is a well-written book that happened to miss the mark for me personally.

Pollan drives nails. Nice memoir of building a private writer's space. I do like his skewering of the modern and post-modern architects. As he seems to have some especial scorn for Philip Johnson, I

recall reading elsewhere that Johnson was notorious for never designing a window that didn't leak. And irony of ironies, Pollan found himself confronted with inadequate construction drawings of the windows, and an architect with no real idea of how to design an inward-opening awning window that didn't inherently leak. One thing that does stand out, from a perspective of years after the project was completed was that Mr. Pollan and his architect put a higher value on the visual and aural aesthetics of an uninsulated shingle roof than on the winter habitability of the workspace.

Really enjoyed the story of how he built a small writers cottage on his property mostly by hand and with some help. I'm jealous because I'd love a retreat like that to write and read in. Pollan's writing style is easy to read. He's also not afraid to poke fun at himself when he messes things up. It's like talking to a friend.

I remember in high school hearing about the eccentricities of Walden and rolling my eyes. This book has helped me see why that book has held such a strong place in the zeitgeist... and yes, makes me want to build my own little place in the woods. I really appreciated how Pollan went into some of the architectural history and theory - although at one point I just wanted to shout at him to just get up off of his duff and DO something rather than reading about doing something! And then only a few paragraphs later, he made fun of himself for that very thing, and went and actually started with the doing. Pretty handy, that! Wish it always worked that way for me, the things I could do... The book really has 3 main characters - his architect friend/mentor, his contractor/mentor, and Pollan. The book spends an awful lot of time on the struggle between architects and contractors, and Pollan's place stuck between the two of them... and his gradual acquisition of knowledge and confidence, which allows him to make decisions outside of the blueprints. I read this book on audiobook, so it was solidly built out of imagination. I imagine that the book itself has drawings or illustrations - and see, even just looking at the cover shows me what the finished product looks like, and darn that little hut looks cute and snug! - which would help give it shape mentally... but actually that may have helped me a bit. I rewound and relistened in some parts to try to figure out what he meant when describing building details, and I don't know that I would have thought so hard about it if it had been diagrammed. That said, is this the Omnivore's Dilemma? Nope, not by a long shot. But if I had never read OD, I'd have given it 5 stars, so that's what I'm doing here. (maybe OD should get an imaginary 6th star, to make it fair to every other book?) This was just a really enjoyable book, and it's subtly altered how I look at buildings around me. Worth the reading, definitely.

You're either a Pollan fan or you're not, and for Pollan fans, this book is every bit as fun and informative (tho on a much smaller scale) as Omnivore's Dilemma. If you're into purely linear thought, don't read it. Pollan thinks in spokes -- lots of linear lines shooting out all over the place but never scattershot and always tied together around the edge with an articulate, interesting philosophy. You have to be willing to go with the flow, but he is always entertaining and always a thought ahead of himself. For the time I'm reading it, I want to build a hut even though I have no woods, no pond, and no real desire to sit/work inside one. I'm reading the last part of the book slowly now, reluctant to finish and have to put it away, but willing to because that will let me go on to the next Pollan inspiration.

Michael Pollan's memoir of building a little studio in his yard captured my husband's heart! We've been doing a lot of home improvement lately, and this book was as fun companion as we toiled. I recommend it highly for anyone who is a thoughtful carpenter or hammer user.

This book will very much appeal to the DIY crowd because we've all faced the dilemmas that Mike does...from idea, to planning, tools and searching for competent advice and help. Self-effacing humor is Mike's key to the door to his 'place.' As an avid planner and builder in my spare time, I enjoyed all the foibles and fables that unfold as the plot becomes a place.

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