

communiqué /press release**For immediate release****Toy Town**

From 22 October 1997 to 31 May 1998

In the Octagonal Gallery

Montréal, 19 December 1997 —The Canadian Centre for Architecture is pleased to present **Toy Town**, its sixth exhibition of architectural toys, from 22 October 1997 to 31 May 1998. This show invites visitors of all ages to explore how villages, towns and cities have been represented in toys from Europe and North America. Drawn from CCA's collection, the twenty-nine toys on view reflect shifting social values and different approaches to the design, organisation, and planning of communities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The architecture of toy towns belongs somewhere between reality and fantasy. Whether modelled on actual places or romantic ideas, toy towns possess an architectural cohesiveness and aesthetic harmony that often defy those of the real built world. At the same time, images on the box covers, assembly instructions, and brief texts accompanying the toys provide clues about the reality of everyday life. Thus, toy towns may be interpreted as forms of social building blocks; specific buildings – churches, town halls, factories, houses – establish the civic identity of a town and reflect ideas about good citizenship. Toys also reflect the ability of towns to change. Construction sets were intended to encourage children to play with the architectural language of the townscape. By moving pieces from place to place, the town could be made and remade.

Toy towns provided a moral context for the education of children. Advertising often emphasised “work and play,” or “industry” and “improvement,” and included images of children peacefully cutting and constructing their toys – like the boy and girl at work on the box cover of *Fairy City* (c.1919.) The manufacturer of the German designed *Spear's Model Village* (c. 1925) ascribed a “civilising” influence to the toy town noting that the toy provided “a splendid antidote to the child's natural inclination to pull down and

destroy. It teaches the joy of building up or construction, and spurs the healthy young imagination to weave beautiful fantasies around fictitious dwellers.”

Some toys – especially town building blocks – encouraged children to invent new structures and create new relationships between them. A series of wooden toys, including Brandt’s *Brick Box for Town Building* (ca.1910) and a recent Russian toy representing the city of Pskov, reduced traditional building types, whether onion domed churches or half timber houses, into simple shapes. Nevertheless, the suggestive pictures on the box covers strongly influenced how children might construct their towns.

Other toys were modelled on actual places, such as a brightly-painted nineteenth-century toy representing the famous Russian monastery of Trinity-St. Sergius at Zagorsk. The toy’s tiny ramparts and buildings capture the long history of the monastery, which was established in the fourteenth century. Milton Bradley’s “American Toy Village” (c.1875) offers us a historical perspective on the industrial landscape of Springfield, Massachusetts, complete with munitions tower, gun boat, factories, and workers housing.

Although none of the toys in the exhibition was designed by an architect or planner, many reflect the planning ideals of their times. Several late nineteenth-and early twentieth-century American paper toys include ground plans which organise the towns by function and instil a sense of order, well being, and stability. Indications of civic pride also emerge from these plans: picturesque parkways define the late nineteenth century New York State landscape of *The New Pretty Village* (1897), and wide grass boulevards lead to Fairy City’s “City-Beautiful” – inspired civic centre.

The popularity of train sets and toy cars in the twentieth century provided a new context for playing with the toy town. One manufacturer advertised that toy towns went “swell with trains.” “America’s Greatest Toy Town”, *Plasticville, U.S.A.*, represents the quintessential 1950s American strip development. Its brightly-coloured roadside motel and swimming pool, snack bar, gas station, factory, and airport all reflect the impact of the automobile. The French Majokit toy town (ca.1987) takes planning for the car into contemporary times. Neither rural nor urban, the Majokit town is defined by roads and parking lots rather than by buildings; the town becomes merely a backdrop to the activity of driving.

Above all, **Toy Town** shows us what toys have taught children about adult concepts of community and about the child's sense of order. As the renowned British architect and urban theorist Peter Smithson puts it, writing in the exhibition catalogue:

Children want things to be "in the right place" ... the train station to be located in relation to the track, like a real station – signals, buffers all correct. With doll-houses, kitchen things must be in the kitchen. So also with toy towns ... the "institutions" – fire station, town hall, flower shop – each in its appropriate place. A deep sense of wrongness is felt if they are misplaced. So taking them out of the box begins a ritual of getting them correctly located.

Interactive Computer Station for Visitors of All Ages

As a feature of the exhibition, *SimTown: The Town You Build Yourself*, a computer programme designed for youngsters and set up for use by visitors of all ages, provides an introduction to economic and ecological issues surrounding town planning. Visitors can design their own new town or solve the existing problems of the "fixer-upper." Like the paper toys on view in the exhibition, the computer game encourages responsible behaviour – "SimTown is your town. It's yours to build, to play with, and to take care of. You're the Town Builder – the boss. You're in charge." It also encourages visitors to make changes to the town, bulldozing and rebuilding whenever necessary.

Toy-Making Workshops for Families and Schools

Youngsters are also invited to take part in a toy-making workshop organised by the CCA in conjunction with **Toy Town**. The programme includes a brief tour of the exhibition followed by a workshop in the Shaughnessy House. Participants are encouraged to explore the organisation, forms, volumes, and scale of a selection of toy towns, and have the opportunity to create their own towns in toy form.

Workshops for families (children 3 to 12 years old with an adult companion) are held every week-end from 1 November 1997 through 26 April 1998. Advance reservations are necessary at (514) 939-7026 during museum hours. Admission charge: \$2 per child and \$4 per adult.

Workshops for elementary schools groups (grades 1, 2 and 3) are held on Thursdays and Fridays from 15 January through 24 April 1998. For more information and reservations, please call (514) 939-7002 from Monday to Friday between 8:30 am and 4 pm.

CCA Publishes its Sixth Catalogue on Architectural Toys

Published by the CCA, the accompanying bilingual catalogue *La ville en jeux/Toy Town* includes a thematic introduction by Peter Smithson and an essay by Cammie McAtee examining the issues and ideas outlined above and incorporating notes on the toys in the exhibition. A detailed checklist is also included. The forty-seven-page catalogue has twenty-seven colour illustrations and retails at \$15.95 CAN. It is available at the CCA Bookstore.

The exhibition **Toy Town** is curated by Cammie McAtee, Assistant Curator, CCA. Peter Smithson designed the installation and consulted on the selection of the toys.

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