

communiqué /press release**For immediate release****Dream Houses, Toy Homes**

From 8 November 1995 to 31 March 1996

In the Octagonal Gallery

Montréal, 8 November 1995 – The Canadian Centre for Architecture is pleased to present its fifth architectural toys exhibition from 8 November 1995 to 31 March 1996.

Dream Houses, Toy Homes brings together 33 European and North American architectural toys dating from the early nineteenth century to 1995, encompassing images, ideas and changes over time concerning domestic architecture and family life.

The exhibition explores a number of issues: What notions of home and childhood are expressed in architectural toys? What conceptions of children at play do they present? What types of houses do these toys represent, and what do they say about the way girls and boys play and how they learn?

Toys can be seen as representations of adult values. This is particularly true of toys which present images of houses, children at play, and family life. Over time, changing values have fostered a wide range of designs and ideas with implications for a child's understanding of the home. Toy manufacturers are often explicit about their intention not only to help children develop manual dexterity and design skills through play, but also to mould the behaviour, aspirations and desires of children – future citizens and consumers. Nevertheless, building toys make us aware of the independence and creativity children bring to play activities. While parents and toy manufacturers may propose ideas about what houses should look like or who – boys or girls – should build them, children often ignore these limitations, finding ingenious ways to create their own designs and forms of play.

Organised by guest curator Alice T. Friedman, Professor of Art and Co-Director of the Architecture Program at Wellesley College, in Massachusetts, ***Dream Houses, Toy Homes*** explores these ideas in five roughly chronological sections:

Domesticating Childhood includes a number of toys which show the Victorian home as a private sanctuary of family life. Many box covers, depicting cherubic boys and girls playing together in gardens and parlours, present the home as a place that protects the innocence of childhood. A number of nineteenth-century toys have been assembled in this section to show a variety of middle-class “dream-houses”.

- **Home Improvements** brings together turn-of-the-century toys suggesting that play can provide a route to self-improvement and healthy living. Many such toys focus on the educational benefits of playing with simple blocks that encourage experimentation with shapes and spaces. Others emphasize the benefits of “progress” through new materials. Some favour simple, unornamented designs and “clean” lines, contrasting with the decorative details, colours, and textured surfaces in the houses of the earlier era.
- **Boy Builders** provides examples of construction toys from the 1920s and ‘30s marketed specifically for boys, indicating a new emphasis on gender roles in the toys of these years. Boys were encouraged to try their hand at engineering in skyscrapers and fantasy structures, while girls were often shown as admiring onlookers, or not represented at all.
- In **Suburban Dreams**, a range of single-family house models from the 1920s to the 1950s has been assembled, revealing the dominant preference for cozy cottages and bungalows, and the optimistic view of home life that accompanied the spread of suburban living. This series of examples ends with the first plastic toy in the exhibition, Design-a-House (c. 1958), which builds various ranch-houses and split-level designs common to the period.
- **Batteries Not Included** looks at contemporary toys, showing the radical changes in colour, design, and detailing made possible by injection-mould plastics. The continuing hold of the single-family “dream-house” on the popular imagination is explored, as is the importance of television advertising, and the increased emphasis

on consumerism and gender stereotyping that has been present in toys over the past 30 years.

Whether children play with these building toys and models in ways which accept or subvert values they represent, it is clear that for adults, toys provide an opportunity to convey both a social and an economic message.

The CCA's Fifth Publication About Architectural Toys

The exhibition is accompanied by a small bilingual catalogue illustrated in colour, the CCA's fifth publication about architectural toys drawn from its collection. It includes an essay by Alice T. Friedman exploring the themes of the exhibition, as well as notes by Rosemary Haddad, Associate Librarian of the CCA, on the toys on view in the exhibition. Entitled ***Maisons de rêve, maisons jouets / Dream Houses, Toy Homes***, the catalogue is available at the CCA Bookstore for \$9.95.

A panel discussion on Architecture, Childhood & Gender

Held in conjunction with the exhibition, a panel discussion focusing on architecture, childhood and gender will take place on Thursday, 9 November 1995 at 5:45 pm in the Paul-Desmarais Theatre. Such topics as the idea of gendered play in the nineteenth century; the creation of the idea of childhood; the development of the "ideal home" as a child-centred environment; and the "domestication" of boys and girls through play activities will be explored. The discussion will be moderated by Alice T. Friedman, guest curator of the exhibition. Panelists will include: Benjamin Gianni, Dean of the School of Architecture, Carleton University (Ottawa); Anne Higonnet, Professor, Art Department, Wellesley College (Massachusetts); and Susanna Torre, Director, Academy of Art, Cranbrook Educational Community (Bloomfield Hills, Michigan). Admission is free but seating is limited.

**Acquisition of the CCA Collection of Architectural Toys and Games
has been generously supported by Bell Canada.**