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**CCA Delves into a National Obsession with
The American Lawn: Surface of Everyday Life
Fifth and Final Exhibition in "The American Century" Series
From 16 June to 8 November 1998**

Montréal, 16 June 1998 — Bungalows in tract developments, suburban corporate headquarters, and the White House are all alike in that they sit behind a lawn: a carefully contrived patch of "nature" that lies open to the sky and to a multitude of uses and meanings. Domestic symbol, civic showplace, economic force, and national icon, this omnipresent strip of green is the subject of the groundbreaking exhibition ***The American Lawn: Surface of Everyday Life***.

On view at the Canadian Centre for Architecture from 16 June through 8 November 1998, ***The American Lawn*** brings together objects and documents as various as the topic itself. Among them are Space Age lawnmowers; lovingly fetishized lawn ornaments; stereoscopic photographs of the "border crossings" between lawns; excerpts from the cinema of the lawn (such as *Blue Velvet*); vintage television footage of protests on the Washington Mall; sports shoes with high-tech cleats; and plugs of patented grass, all combined into an interpretative three-dimensional installation.

The American Lawn is the fifth and final exhibition in the multi-year series "The American Century," organized by Phyllis Lambert, Director of the CCA. The series seeks to cast a fresh eye on critical aspects of modern America's architectural culture: its promises and disappointments, its roots and offshoots, its unparalleled world-wide impact.

According to Phyllis Lambert, "'The American Century' is such a vast topic that we chose to address it through a series of exhibitions, each dealing with a specific case. Our subjects have been the mythical city of the future, at once beguiling and terrifying, which many Europeans believed they had glimpsed in America; Frank Lloyd Wright's visionary wilderness projects of the 1920s; the great, century-old civic landscapes of Frederick Law Olmsted, as seen in their current state; and the building of one of modern America's most powerful cultural phenomena, the Disney theme parks. Each of these subjects demanded its own type of presentation. We assembled historic texts and drawings by European architects; displayed newly created analytical models, including computer animations, of Wright's projects; commissioned three outstanding artists to photograph new bodies of work focusing on the Olmsted parks; and reconstructed from the working documents of the Imagineers the untold history and strategies of Disneyland."

“But whatever the subject matter or its presentation,” Lambert observes, “we kept finding ourselves in an uncertain borderland: between public and private space, between landscape and building, between dream and nightmare. **The American Lawn** brings our series to a fitting conclusion by putting us directly into the most familiar setting of ambiguity and ambivalence. We step onto a patch of green that seems to be natural but is in fact technologically produced. We stand on a plot that appears to be neutral; but being neither city nor country, neither public nor private, it is fraught with tension.”

Discussing the sunny yet ambiguous character of the lawn, Georges Teyssot, one of the exhibition curators, notes that “many scholars have described the American lawn as a post-Civil War phenomenon. But recent research has revealed evidence of the lawn as a pre-Revolutionary feature, well established in the United States by the early national period. The entire history of the suburban yard unrolls from two distinctly different genealogies. From one side came the ‘vernacular,’ descended from the little colonial garden. From the other came the ‘aristocratic,’ which landscape writers such as Andrew Jackson Downing imported from English theorists. Between 1870 and 1890, the border between these two tendencies rapidly faded. The lawn sprang up along that line of erasure between ‘vernacular’ and ‘aristocratic,’ where Americans play out the mundane scenes of daily life and the spectacle of suburban pastoralism.”

The American Lawn: Surface of Everyday Life is curated by a team composed of Beatriz Colomina, Elizabeth Diller, Alessandra Ponte, Ricardo Scofidio, Georges Teyssot and Mark Wigley. The project was initiated by Georges Teyssot and co-ordinated by

Diller + Scofidio, Architects (New York) and Georges Teyssot. Mark Wasiuta has worked as an associate curator with the team since its beginning. Gwynne Keathly served as researcher.

Exhibition Content

The American Lawn introduces its subject by means of a corridor of display cases, which make up a playful “Museum of the Lawn.” Like the vitrines found in natural history museums or archaeological institutes, the cases here present artifacts of American culture, grouped according to the following classifications of the lawn: as locus of childrearing, outdoor parlour, art gallery, playground, work area, private domain, and final resting place. Among the artifacts on view are nineteenth-century embroidered panels, miniature lawn furniture, garden ornaments, vintage illustrations of lawn sports and games, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century trade cards, and images of the lawn as a site of mourning.

Two other displays complement this introductory “Museum.” To one side, illustrating the degree to which lawn care characterizes the people of North America, stands *Homo lawnicus*, a mannequin built entirely out of lawn implements, from a helmet “head” to a backpack “spine” to gardening glove “hands” and cleated shoe “feet”. Adjacent to the “Museum” is a display devoted to lawn care as an outlet for consumer fantasy. Three “advanced design” lawnmowers are presented on rotating disks under auto-show lighting. Nearby, a small television set shows commercials for what were once the latest

lawnmowers; an educational film from the 1960s, offering then-progressive advice on how to deal with a child who refuses to cut the lawn; and a promotional film for a solar-powered robotic lawnmower.

The first main gallery considers the lawn as a space between building and landscape, between city and country. A video version of the welcome mat ushers visitors into this room. Next, a series of infra-red aerial transparencies made by the U.S. Geological Survey reveals the layout of the buildings and lawns of nine significant suburban developments dating from the nineteenth century (Olmsted's Riverside, near Chicago) to the present (Disney's Celebration, in Florida). Accompanying the photographs are three-dimensional maquettes, which help to show how the relative footprints of the suburban building and its lawn have changed over the years. A selection of texts and books illustrates the development of suburban landscape theory. In the same space are recent photographs by Gregory Crewdson: staged images of disturbances in the suburbs, in which the balance between "human" and "natural" seems to have gone strangely awry.

The next gallery addresses the lawn as a legal space, where private rights and public interests come into conflict. Stereoscopic photographs by Robert Sansone, commissioned for this exhibition, show with three-dimensional clarity the often-disputed borderline between one neighbour's lawn and the next. Since such disagreements – over fences, grass height and type, and the rights of localities to regulate private property – can lead to lawsuits, this gallery displays documents from court cases, with the plaintiff's filing printed on one side and the defendant's on the other.

The lawn as a field of play – including professional play – is the subject of a gallery featuring sports shoes, each with a distinctive, innovative cleat design. A triptych of panels by photographer Jim Dow illustrates the synthetic lawn, as it is framed within the immense architecture of sports arenas. Skeet McAuley's photographs show how the golf lawn is cultivated even in the inhospitable landscape of the American Southwest. Alex McLean's aerial photographs of sports arenas reveal their complex topographies while another series of photo transparencies documents David Mellor's inventive mowing patterns which compete with those of other groundskeepers, in a tacit, nationally televised competition.

The lawn is also a space of science and engineering. The next gallery displays various strains of "natural" grass, juxtaposed with matching samples of artificial turf. Also on view are an array of illustrated patents for turf grass and images of turf grass diseases.

A gallery dedicated to "The Power Lawn" documents the greensward as a feature of governmental and institutional architecture. On the periphery of the gallery are eerily immaculate, unpopulated photographs of suburban corporate campuses, including Saarinen's IBM Research Building and Gordon Bunshaff's First National City Bank – settings where the lawn serves as both the frame for displaying economic prowess and a perimeter of surveillance. The White House lawn, a carefully managed stage for democratic spectacles, is featured on footage shown on four video monitors. Visitors may see American presidents greeting foreign dignitaries on this official yet quasi-informal space, and leaving and arriving in helicopters. Another two monitors, showing protest demonstrations in front of the White House lawn and on the Mall, reveal how a messier, more Whitmanesque version of democracy may use these same spaces.

Finally, the lawn is a site of imagination – an emerald screen on which are projected American dreams and nightmares. In the last gallery, visions of domestic comfort and beauty are embodied in idyllically colourful glass slides made by the Garden Club of America in the 1920s and 1930s. The nightmare lawn, erupting with everything that normal life has covered up, is seen in excerpts from films of horror and violence such as *Blue Velvet* (directed by David Lynch), *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (directed by Don Siegel), *The Adjuster* (directed by Atom Egoyan), *Maximum Overdrive* (directed by Stephen King), and *Halloween* (directed by John Carpenter).

Epilogue: The Photographer's Lawn

An epilogue to the exhibition, shown in the CCA's Octagonal Gallery, presents "The Photographer's Lawn." This selection of historical and contemporary photographs captures both the dream and the anxiety of the lawn in American life, as well as its place in the changing topography of America's built environment. The photographers include Berenice Abbott, Robert Adams, Diane Arbus, Joe Deal, William Eggleston, Walker Evans, Robert Frank, John Gossage, Emmet Gowin, Larry Sultan, Carleton Watkins, and Garry Winogrand.

Exhibition Tour

Like the other exhibitions in "The American Century" series, ***The American Lawn: Surface of Everyday Life*** will travel after its presentation at the CCA. The exhibition will be on view at The Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, from 4 April to 7 June 1999. Other venues and dates are currently being scheduled.

Publication

A major scholarly book, edited and introduced by Georges Teyssot, is being published by Princeton Architectural Press in relation to the exhibition. The book, to be published in English, will be available in early 1999 and includes texts by Beatriz Colomina, Virginia S. Jenkins, Monique Mosser, Therese O'Malley, Alessandra Ponte, and Mark Wigley as well as a photo-essay by Diller + Scofidio. The two aspects of ***The American Lawn*** project – book and show, theory and display, verbal commentary and visual analysis – are separate endeavours playing in counterpoint to one another.

Public Programs

The CCA offers a variety of public programs in conjunction with ***The American Lawn***. Group tours of the exhibition will be available to the general public as well as to university and Cegep students. From late June through August, a film series, "Back Yards," will be shown on Thursday evenings in the CCA's Paul Desmarais Theatre, with additional screenings offered daily during exhibition hours. Five Thursday evening lectures on the subject of the lawn will be presented from 10 September to 15 October; speakers include Georges Teyssot, Claude Cormier, Mark Wasjuta, Bernard Arcand and Serge Bouchard. Also starting in September, a school program entitled ***A Look at the Lawn*** will be offered to primary and secondary school students.

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– 30 –

Information: www.cca.qc.ca/press