Toy homes make for adventure in realm of imagination

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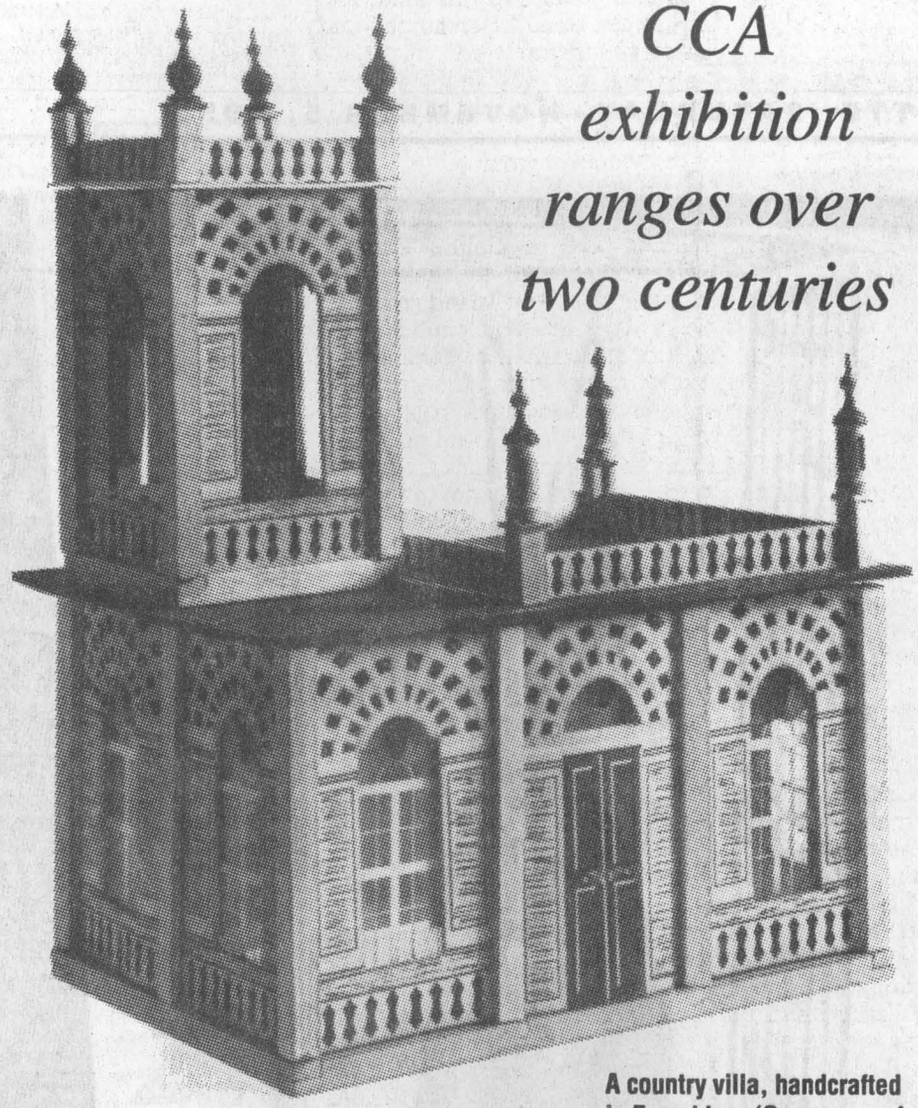
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Colorful CCA exhibition ranges over two centuries



A country villa, handcrafted in Erzgebirge (Germany and Bohemia), about 1800.

Dream Houses, Toy Homes, the fifth exhibition of architectural toys at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, will enchant visitors of all ages. The sheer variety of shapes and sizes of the 33 little buildings featured in this show is a feast for the eyes. From a country villa of 1800, a whimsical, church-like wood and glass structure handcrafted in the Erzgebirge region of Germany and Bohemia, to "Kid CAD," a three-dimensional building kit on CD-ROM manufactured in California, this year's toy show illuminates the complex intersection of play and house design over the past two centuries.

The color palette of the exhibition itself is scrumptious. Bright red and green gabled roofs, gray logs, turquoise doorways and bathroom fixtures, and lots of brilliant yellow differentiate these rustic cabins, Victorian townhouses, suburban bungalows, sprawling ranch-houses, and pseudo-medieval castles. The miniature buildings are in special glass cases (these include handrails and steps for younger viewers) in the octagonal gallery, adjacent anteroom, and the corridor (called the loggia) leading to the museum's bookstore.

Never in its six-year history has so much pink plastic appeared in the sober galleries of the Canadian Centre for Architecture. This is especially true of toys selected to illustrate recent trends in playhouse design, which include three magnificent houses: a fuschia Barbie Dream House of 1985, a smaller, two-storey, pale pink model constructed from a 1990 bucket of Dream Builders blocks, and a fantastic 14-room mansion, designed in 1993 by the Montreal-based Ritvik Toys Inc. This hinged, tripartite palace has a three-storey Palladian window illuminating a monumental room with grand piano and a potted palm.

Indeed, Dream Houses, Toy Homes is a lighthearted and extremely witty exhibition, which at the same time offers serious commentary on the power of toys to reinforce gender roles. While previous CCA toy shows have steered clear of the gender politics of toy design, this year's exhibition explores this tricky social issue in some depth.

The marked difference in the toys intended for girls and boys is a theme that runs through all five sections of the exhibition. Domesticating Childhood features the oldest toys and illustrates how architectural play prior to World War I was a family affair. Girls, boys, and parents are pictured on the boxes of blocks in cozy parlors and lovely gardens, working together to construct freestanding and consciously middle-class or even aristocratic dwellings. Toys like One Dandy Toy House of 1903, with its variety of textures – shingles, masonry, brick, and even lace – romanticized the notion of the unique, personalized and detached family home.

This all changed after the Great War, when boys' architectural toys were more typically skyscrapers and bridges – decidedly non-domestic structures – while the world of home remained the province of little girls. Boy Builders includes some amusing stereotypes of boys at this time as robust and all-powerful engineers. Typical of this genre was Boycraft, a peg-and-hole assembly system, described as "the new construction toy for the thinking boy – builds manhood – spreads joy." Some toys in this part of the exhibition show boys concentrating on construction projects, while their sisters swoon in the background, emphasizing the old dictum that boys are rational, while girls are emotional. Erector-brik, a distant relative of Erector sets, and Le Roi des Constructeurs exclude girls completely in their images.

Boy Builders would have been enriched by links to the real world of engineers and architects in this period, perhaps through the inclusion of images from the architectural press or material from schools of architecture. The first woman architect in Canada, Esther Marjorie Hill, became a member of the Alberta Association of Architects in 1925. But many of the pioneering women who studied architecture before World War II were encouraged by their teachers to specialize in housing and interior decoration, exactly the situation reflected in toys of the period. Despite this pressure, many Canadian woman architects went on to design significant public and commercial buildings.

The section of the exhibition titled Suburban Dreams is equally tongue-in-cheek, although not as explicit about the gendering of toy houses. Highlights here include the Bumpalow House and Cottage, two relatively modest dwellings of painted cardboard produced by the Milton Bradley Company. These charming little buildings were part of a larger Bumpalow Town, which was comprised of six "easy builder" structures. The ubiquitous post-war ranch house is represented in the exhibition by the Design-a-House of 1958. This multicolored, plastic beauty features a system of tongue-and-groove walls and typifies the revolutionary effect of plastic on toy design following its extensive use in World War II.

But by far the most alluring toy in the show is the Barbie Dream House, which through its sheer scale and electrifying color commands plenty of attention. Barbie, the 11.5-inch femme fatale introduced by Mattel in 1959, has occupied a series of sensational dwellings in her many lives as a nurse and airline stewardess (1961), astronaut (1965), surgeon (1973), Olympic athlete (1975), aerobics instructor (1984), rock star (1986), UNICEF ambassador (1989), Ice Capades star (1990), U.S. presidential candidate (1992) and Air Force Thunderbird squadron leader (1994).

The 1985 Barbie abode featured in Dream Houses, Toy Homes is particularly daring. This A-frame house features a rather open second floor. The walls are simple railings. Windows and doors really open and a variety of flowers grow in Barbie's four window boxes. The house features pink floors, pink furniture, and pink plastic (glass) in the pink windows; Barbie's bedroom has a pink computer and pink television.

This year's toy show at the CCA is well-researched and, as always, beautifully presented. The generously illustrated, bilingual catalogue, which also includes an informative essay by CCA associate librarian Rosemary Haddad, will be a welcome addition to the growing literature on architectural toys. There is, however, one unfortunate omission from the show. Dream Houses, Toy Homes includes no examples of houses from the 1960s and 1970s. For an exhibition on gender and play, this seems like a missed opportunity. These two decades were, after all, "a whole new epoch in the history of gender," in the words of historian Mary Ryan. The period witnessed the introduction of the birth control pill and the massive entry of women into the paid labor force.

Perhaps material on the crucial decades of the 1960s and '70s will be covered in the series of talks on architecture, childhood, and gender, scheduled to take place at the CCA on Nov. 9. Speakers will include Benjamin Gianni of the School of Architecture at Carleton University, Anne Higonnet of Wellesley College in Massachusetts, and Susanna Torre, of the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan.

Meanwhile, Barbie's latest pad, not included in the exhibition, is as out of sync as ever with the real world. The 1995 "3-in-1" house features a townhouse, a beach home, and a ranch house in a single structure. This year's Barbies include a teacher, a lifeguard, and a firefighter. The message is clear: it's time for Barbie to become an architect.

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■ *Dream Houses, Toy Homes is at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, 1920 Baile St., from Nov. 8 to March 31. Information: 939-7000.*