

## Sub-Urban

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# Sub-Urban: A Model Community

## New Work by René Price

Virginia MacDonnell

The early part of our century was characterized by an increasing enamourization with the urban environment. Everyone wanted the city life with its promises of vitality, excitement and endless consumer potential. Life was destined to become easier (via technology) with more time to devote to complete and total play. The tools necessary to ensure this lifestyle were — by necessity — mass-produced. Cars, blenders and whatnot rolled off of assembly lines and into the arms of the waiting consumer. This change in societal paradigms is aptly reflected in the art produced during the 1930s and 1940s. Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* with its colorful squares cruising along the canvas, evokes the sense of excitement and urgency which permeated the city (New York) of that era; however, other art explored the darker implications of the changes which urban society was experiencing. *Brave New World*, by Aldous Huxley, takes society's increasing reliance on technology to (potentially) absurd and disturbing ends — nevertheless, many of the situations described in his novel have actually come to fruition. At best perhaps, despite widespread embracing of new ways of life, people still retain a kind of ambivalence regarding urbanization and technology in society.

Thus, especially in consideration of the usual cyclical cycle of cultural history, the love affair with the city died out to be replaced by a love

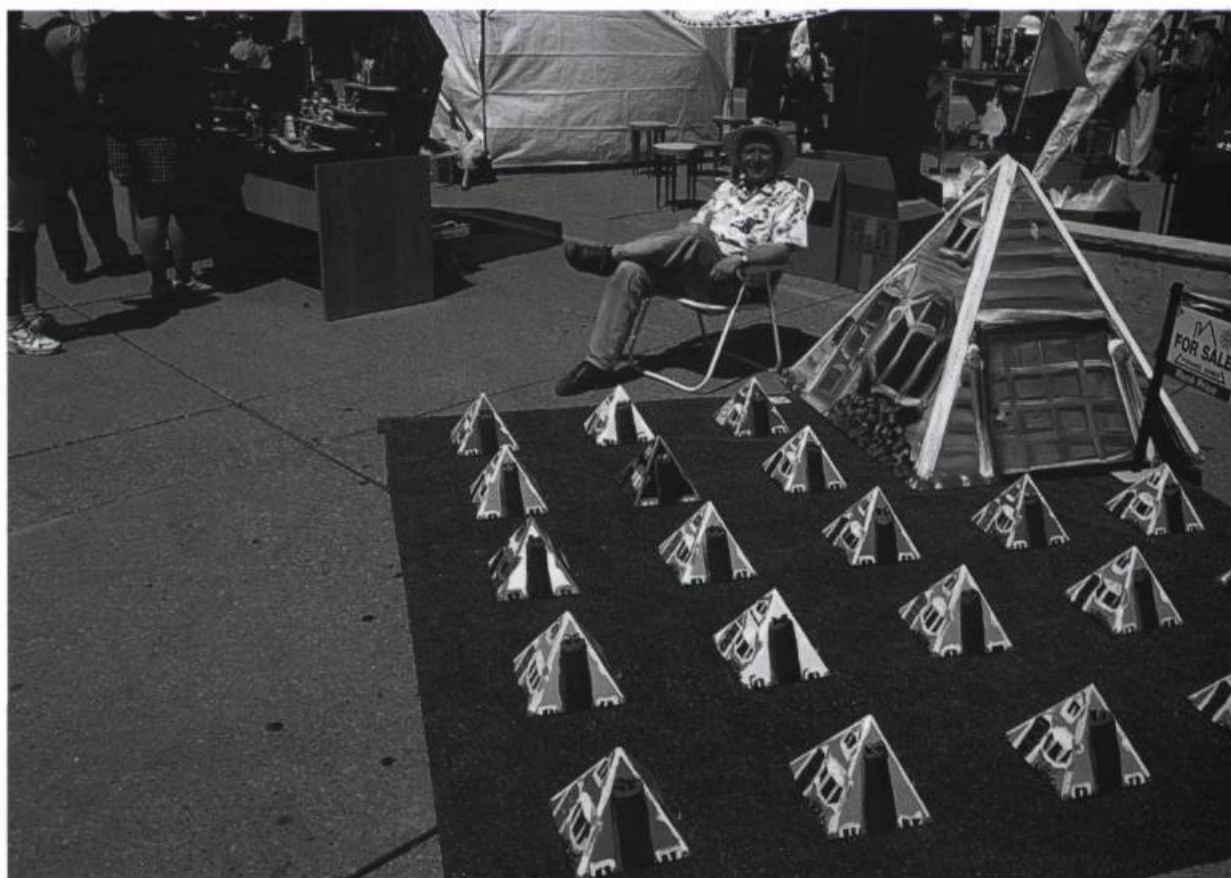
affair with the suburbs. Suddenly, all of the things that were previously seen as positives in an urban environment (diversity, apartment living, crowds and noise) became things to be avoided. In droves, people left the city, looking for a living situation where they could have large homes, big yards and a sterile, clean atmosphere. That these suburbs were comprised of homes which were virtually identical to each other added to their value as the people who inhabited them wanted the security of being with people "just like them".

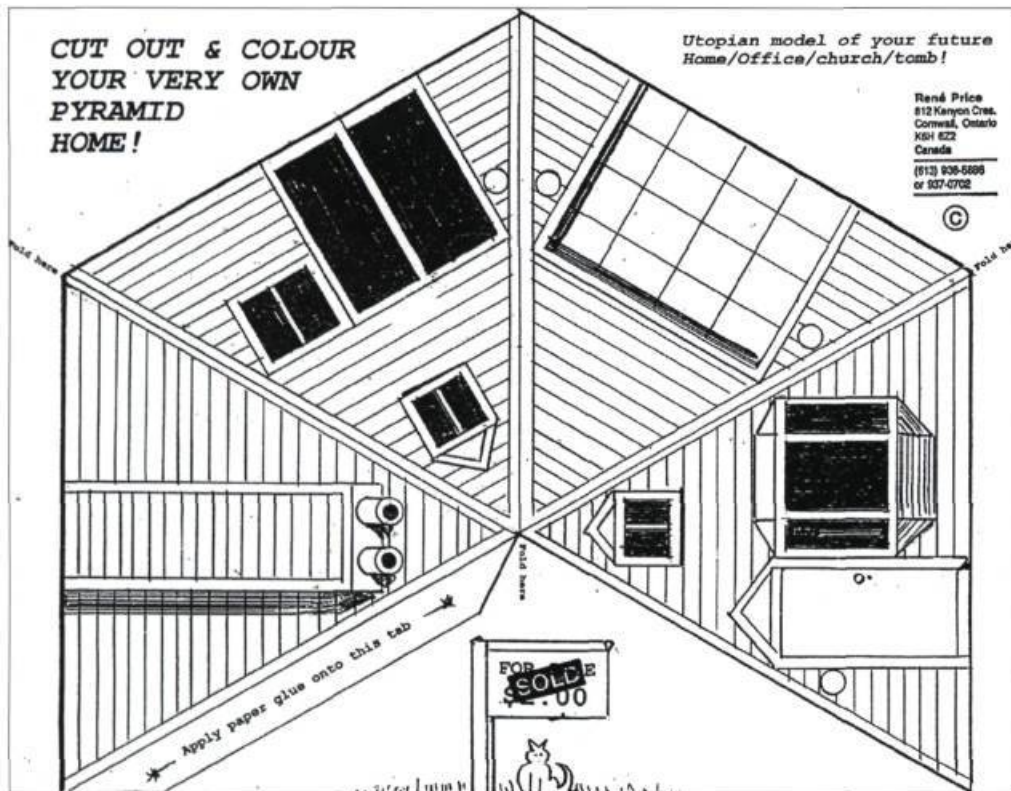
The ongoing debate between city — versus suburban — living continues today. Suburbanites extol their clean, safe neighbourhoods, their large lots and big,

modern schools. City-dwellers boast about their museums, theatres, restaurants and cultural diversity. They are also quick to point out that most suburbanites work and relax in the downtown core.

Enter René Price. Artist, iconoclast and "suburban satirist", Price joins this fray with his latest body of work *Pyramid Homes*. He offers us the opportunity to construct our very own *Utopian Model Home/Office/Church/Tomb*. His recent exhibition of this work took place as part of the Toronto Outdoor Art Show, in front of City Hall, in July 1997. Set out on a patch of artificial grass, Price exhibited a number of small pyramid homes, overseen by a large mother/model home. A life-size "for sale" sign stood beside, while

René Price, *Pyramid Houses*, 1997.  
Installation view at Toronto Outdoor Art Show. Photo: Eleanor Doran.





a fake black bird roosted nearby.

The homes were of the same dimensions and differed only in their colouring. Each was roughly painted with the same trim and number of doors and windows. They could be hand-assembled in a fold and paste method (perhaps the ultimate prefab) or wooden models already assembled could be purchased. These pyramid home/office/church/tombs explore the manner in which — increasingly — the lines which separate those aspects of our lives are blurred. Particularly, modern society finds that those technologies which were envisioned only a generation or two earlier as giving us more free-time to relax, have actually increased our work load by allowing us to easily “bring our office home”. Increasing automation and mass-production of objects has also alleviated the need for a number of people-jobs resulting in (a) more people out of work and staying at home and (b) more people working freelance from their homes. Security in contemporary society is fairly elusive. As such, perhaps it isn't surprising that some people do want the shield that conformity offers.

In this work, Price also addresses the artificial “natural” world which suburbs create. The placement of the houses on the plastic grass, the fake bird on the model home, subtly but effectively comment on the fact that urban and suburban environments are built only through dis-

placing the natural world which was already there. We build our roads and homes and shopping malls, leaving rooms for birds and trees and waterways only in places which are convenient and unobtrusive for our needs. We impose this dominion with little regard for any long range consequences of such actions. Often any attempts to reintegrate “nature” in a suburban environment result in little more than “decoration” with a few flowers in front of the house and a plastic figure or two on the front lawn.

In multifold ways Price's work also addresses the consumerism which has become endemic in our society. There are different styles of pyramid homes available ranging in price from the \$2.00 paper do-it-yourself construction to the already assembled and decorated wooden model for \$60.00. As such their exhibition at the Outdoor Art Show was rather clever on Price's part, as the show is oriented and based upon artists selling as much art as possible to as many people as they can over a three day period. The Pyramid house installation offered a bit of ambiguity to the numerous art-consumers who attended the event. Everyone from three year olds with dripping ice creams to ninety year olds with walkers, stopped to examine these homes. Compared with the paintings, ceramics and jewelry which dominated the show, Price's sculptures —

despite the large FOR SALE sign in the midst of his installation — were a subtler kind of ware. Price stated that he planned to use the Outdoor Art Show as a kind of focus group, due to the broad range of audience in attendance. And while Price's work characteristically challenges different aspects of our culture (for example his previous exhibitions *Bang Bang You're Dead* which was shown in Toronto and Montreal and his *Galerie Pink* show titled *Suburbia*) he is never mocking. As much as he may be critical of (lack of) qualities in our society he is also aware of and interested in how the individuals who make up that society judge *his* work. Do they understand his intentions? Does it get a reaction? Are people interested? In this way his installation is part of a real dialogue between the art object and the viewers.

With hundreds of artists and artisans displaying their wares, and with thousands of visitors converging on this three-day event, the square in front of City Hall, becomes transformed into a real “town square”. Every kind of art which can be imagined is represented and viewed by people from all sorts of diverse living environments. Somehow, everyone and everything seems approachable. Still, one can't help but wonder if Price is warning us that the motto of any community — artistic, urban or suburban — might best be CAVEAT EMPORIUM. ■

**L'auteur commente *Pyramid Homes*, que René Price présentait au Toronto Outdoor Art Show, en juillet dernier. Une œuvre à connotation quelque peu satirique sur nos modes de vie actuels en société, que ce soit en ville ou en banlieue. L'installation comprenait une imposante pyramide-mère, entourée d'une multitude de maisons-pyramides miniatures de mêmes dimensions, le tout posé sur un gazon synthétique. L'artiste offrait au visiteur la possibilité d'acquiescer et de réaliser lui-même son *Modèle utopique de votre future Maison/Bureau/Église/Tombeau*, ou, pour un coût plus élevé, un modèle en bois déjà assemblé et peint. Le travail de Price questionne différents aspects de la culture contemporaine, dont le besoin effréné pour la consommation. À Toronto, son installation cherchait à établir un dialogue fructueux et vivant avec les visiteurs de tous âges. Malgré la charge critique qu'il adresse à quelques-uns de nos comportements sociaux, Price n'est jamais méprisant ou condescendant. L'approche qu'il privilégie, teintée d'un humour certain, vise à rejoindre le plus de gens possible; et Price n'a de cesse de connaître l'impact que produit son œuvre, de vérifier la compréhension que les gens ont de ses gestes et de ses intentions.**