

The Inner Meanings of Suburban Housing

By PHYLLIS BRAFF

GREENVALE

TO some people, suburbia is the place to move to when you want a private home with backyard in which to raise 2.5 children. When the conceptual artist Hannes Brunner thinks of suburbia, and especially housing in suburbia, he sees a tangle of media influences with broad sociological implications.

"One doesn't realize how neighborhoods are landscaped through mental prototypes of suburban housing," Mr. Brunner said recently, as he completed the final steps for his exhibition, "Suburban Entity," on view through Saturday at the Hillwood Art Museum on the C. W. Post campus of Long Island University, here in Greenvale.

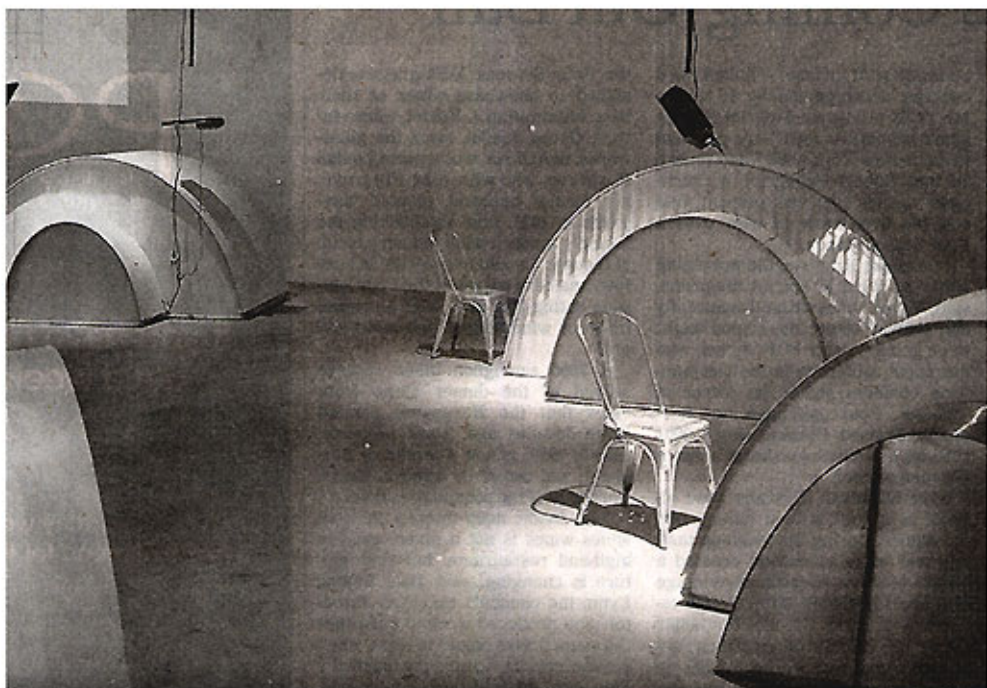
These mental prototypes, he believes, are the fictional images that creep into the consciousness, particularly through the serialized television programs familiar to people in many countries. And so for "Suburban Entity," he has researched the media's influence on housing, attitudes and mindsets in the three regions among which he divides his time: Kiel, Germany, where he is a professor at the Muthesius Academy of Architecture, Design and Fines Arts; Switzerland, near Lake Constance, and Oyster Bay.

"Certain artificial things are common to suburbias everywhere," he said. "A community on Long Island will put in winding roads as if they were natural pathways, and a community in Germany will put in a manmade lake and surround it with imitation clubhouses. The media shapes similar dreams across a wide geographic span."

Mr. Brunner's research for the show started with questionnaires for residents in the three areas, intended to gather their thoughts about design and furnishing decisions, and to uncover influences from television. For each country he then created an exhibition plan that interweaves fictional television situations with images, photographs and responses from the questionnaires.

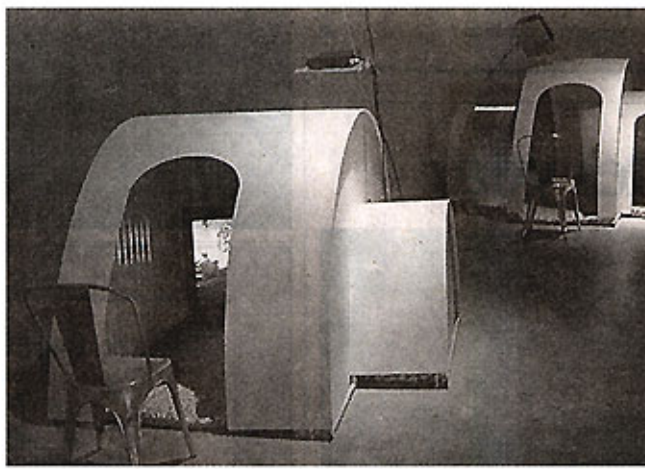
The Hillwood Art Museum's installation is the inaugural public viewing. The Swiss version will follow in May; preparations for a showing in Germany are under way.

The exhibition points out how the line between make-believe and reality is blurred when it comes to suburban housing. It includes five videos



Hillwood Art Museum

Hannes Brunner's installation on suburbs at the Hillwood Art Museum. "Neighborhoods are landscaped through mental prototypes of suburban housing," he said.



made by the artist that depict questionnaire participants sitting in their Long Island living rooms as they enact dialogues from serialized television dramas. Each short, continuous-loop film is projected inside its own individually designed, organically shaped habitat. Some of the films use more than one wall as screen surface; some play against a rippled, translucent roofing material; and

some can also be seen on the habitat's exterior.

"It is possible to look inside, at a personal life, but only as it appears through the media," Mr. Brunner said of his installation. "But people want to be observed from the exterior, too, and that is why so much glass is chosen for housing."

The artist created a computer game as another component of the

exhibition. It can be played and followed on monitors and on a large wall surface in the gallery. Much like chess, two competitive sets of pieces move across a board trying to dominate each other, but one group of markers displays images from television while the other uses photographs of actual homes submitted by questionnaire participants.

Mr. Brunner's previous exhibitions include project-oriented installations dealing with environmental and housing situations in Detroit; Stuttgart, Germany; and Rome.

Conceptual artists like Mr. Brunner may not build communities, but their insights into contemporary social and planning issues can lead to provocative exhibitions and possibly chart new terrain for stimulating discussions.

"Suburban Entity" is at the Hillwood Art Museum, Long Island University, C. W. Post Campus, Northern Boulevard, through Feb. 22. Information: (516) 299-4073.

INSIDE

THE SOCIOLOGY OF HOUSING

An art installation that examines how your house is like the one the Brady Bunch lived in.

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