ROBERT YOUDS
For Everyone a Fountain

FOR EVERYONE A UTOPIA?

On a cold, dark day in December at Open Space, the warm coloured lights of Robert Youds' *For Everyone a Fountain* draw in weather-soaked visitors like a burning hearth. The installation is both architectural and painterly in its demeanor. Galvanized steel sawhorses and aluminum sheets sit on top of one another, creating a rectangular wall with square arches. Lying down on one row of sawhorses are standard desk lamps that slowly alternate between warm and cool colours, engaging the attention of visitors. The lights change colour based on an algorithm built by developer Steven A. Bjornson. Four photographs of Victoria's famous Butchart Gardens, one image for each season, were scanned into the algorithm. The visitors experience colours and sequences generated by the algorithm as it interprets the photographs. While photographs are already a form of technology that is trying to portray a reality, the algorithm is adding another layer of artificial intelligence by attempting to "see" and to "translate."

What's in a name? Victoria-based artist Robert Youds finds that with "every show I do I have lots of fun with titling, as much as making the work. . . . The titles have so much [meaning] for me."[1] Youds' latest installation, *For Everyone a Fountain*, references Israeli-Canadian architect Moshe Safdie's utopian planning book, *For Everyone a Garden*. However, the allusions to Safdie's work in *For Everyone a Fountain* go beyond the installation's name.

In 1964, Safdie began to devise a model community housing project to be built for Expo 67 in Montreal. The idea for his Habitat 67 came out of Safdie's master's thesis in architecture, in which he proposed to industrialize housing to make it available and affordable to all. For Safdie, Habitat 67

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1. Robert Youds, artist talk at Open Space, Victoria, BC, November 18, 2017. https://vimeo.com/246091957.

was not just an experiment in housing but also in building community life.[2] His original plan proposed to build nearly one thousand apartments, with multilevel external covered walkways that could take you to the building's shopping area, school, and art gallery. Each apartment would include beautiful views in several directions, cheap heating and air conditioning (via a power station inside the building), and an automatic watering system for the covered garden space that came with each unit. As Safdie memorably promised, "For everyone a garden."[3]

In reality, Safdie had to give up several elements of his original concept for Habitat 67. Only 158 units were built, with no commercial section. But the architect kept his memorable promise, as he fended off the elimination of the garden irrigation system.[4] In the end, even after cutting back on the concepts, Habitat 67 cost over $22 million, or $140,000 per unit;[5] thus, Safdie also compromised his utopian dream of revolutionizing inexpensive architecture. In fact, today, instead of being affordable housing for everyday people, Habitat 67 has been a site of commodification, as some apartments in the modernist complex are now worth over a million dollars.[6] Even Safdie's dream for a garden did not work out for most units, as Montreal's fluctuating weather extremes created an inhospitable environment for the plants.[7] Safdie's plan simply might have been too ambitious to be cost effective. Indeed, many contemporary housing developments are building from Safdie's ideas, such as garden spaces and housing bringing together communities through shared spaces. For example, Les Grands Voisins in Paris's 14th district is a former hospital turned into a residency to house 600

2. Robert Fulford, *This Was Expo* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1968), 112.
3. Moshe Safdie, *For Everyone a Garden* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1974).
4. John Lownsbrough, *The Best Place to Be: Expo 67 and Its Time* (Toronto: Pearson, 2012), 124.
5. Lownsbrough, 123.
6. James Brillion, "Apartment in Moshe Safdie's Habitat 67 Undergoes Full Interior Redesign," *dezeen*, February 25, 2017, https://www.dezeen.com/2017/02/25/renovated-apartment-moshe-safdie-habitat-67-montreal-undergoes-full-interior-redesign-emarchitecture/.
7. Fulford, 116.

vulnerable people.[8] To make sure these people are not segregated to their own space, the project has included a community garden, tents that can be rented out by tourists in the community plaza, and a restaurant, with all the proceeds going back to services that help these vulnerable people.

As architectural journalist Adele Weder explains, Habitat 67 was built during a time when "Canadians foresaw a technology-driven future of endless prosperity and social harmony."[9] In many ways, this vision has continued with the current assumption that technology always improves quality of life. More and more products are being created to help humans on an everyday basis, while cities throughout the country hope to draw in young tech companies to receive an economic boost. However, there can be a real hazard to framing technological progress and social progress as mutually inclusive.[10]

Structurally, the now-iconic raw concrete staggered blocks of Habitat 67 are echoed in the repeating mundane materials of the aluminum sheet and galvanized steel sawhorses that Youds uses in *For Everyone a Fountain*. Both materials demonstrate the standardization of systems. But with Youds' and Safdie's works, it is the "gardens" that help visitors look past the dull, grey materials. Safdie passionately argued that once plants bloomed in all the apartments' gardens, Habitat 67 would come to life.[11] Similarly, Youds saw the objects in his installation as attempting to become a garden. As Youds describes, "The objects in our lives are informed by our quest for

8.   Les Grands Voisins, "Présentation et histoire du site," https://lesgrandsvoisins.org/le-projet-2018-2020/presentation-et-histoire-du-site/.
9.   Adele Weder, "For Everyone a Garden: The Failed Dream of Montreal's Habitat '67," *Walrus*, January 12, 2008, updated June 27, 2017, https://thewalrus.ca/for-everyone-a-garden/.
10. Adrienne LaFrance, "Technology, the Faux Equalizer," *Atlantic*, March 31, 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/03/half-full-tech/476025/.
11. Fulford, 116.

understanding ourselves, our own identity. In this case, this is a set of tables that wants to be a room, and a room that wants to be a garden."[12]

For Everyone a Fountain is the fifth installment in an ongoing series by the artist. With each iteration, Youds titles the installation with allusions to Safdie's book (*For Everyone a . . .*) and modifies it to incorporate objects that become necessities for life. For example, fountains were first used in ancient Greece to distribute clean drinking water, and Youds' 2009 installation *For Everyone a Window*[13] may reference the comforts of being in a shelter, protected from the elements. Having an artwork's title embody the desire to give everyone equal access to basic needs is a hopeful viewpoint, but it also hinges on the same utopian ideal as Safdie's Habitat 67.

Youds explains that the concept for this installation came from experiencing "something and then think[ing] about something else simultaneously . . . [like when] you're driving in your car in the city but thinking about the country. . . . [It is] symptomatic of the condition that we live in today."[14] This escapist notion has been thoroughly engrained in our cultures as a result of technology and efforts to create a "better way" of living. Safdie felt that he "could easily spend a whole day in Habitat without leaving home" due to the fact that the Habitat's gardens gave him "the choice of being in or out of doors."[15] However, the gardens of Habitat 67 were not actually outdoors; they were indoor, controlled environments with surrounding windows. We are made to feel all the characteristics of entering a garden with Youds' artwork—colourfulness, tones that change over time, a peacefulness or tranquility through observation—but this installation is not actually a garden. What happens to our society when we persist with this type of escapism?

12. Robert Youds, personal interview by Naomi Kennedy, Victoria, BC, November 9, 2017.
13. *For Everyone a Window* is now held in the National Gallery of Canada's permanent collections.
14. Robert Youds, personal interview by Greta Hamilton, Victoria, BC, August 16, 2017.
15. Safdie, 46.

Youds touches on this question in one element of his installation. While the mesmerizing lights keep visitors entertained and engaged, in the far corner of *For Everyone a Fountain* is an inconspicuous pile of industrial rags. Youds revealed that "the rags are a form of gesture, they are a remnant. There is a trace of humanism that exists in the rags."[16] These rags are a reminder that technology is not an equalizer. While technology can benefit society, it is not necessarily helpful to, or used by, all—only to those who have the money and accessibility.[17] In fact, by escaping into the world of technology, we can often forget our fellow human beings. While social media is a way of "connecting" to others, it is also often a way to avoid the realities of those who are in need. The rags are reminiscent of the unwanted clothing scattered around the streets downtown in cities; some of the pieces left behind are from people experiencing homelessness. Both the clothing on the streets and the rags on *For Everyone a Fountain* are reminders of the humanity that is often forgotten, especially when more alluring objects bloom in front of us.

Beautiful gardens, like technology, can also be a way to escape and forget about those who are marginalized. It is significant that Youds chose the landscapes of Butchart Gardens to interpret a mechanized utopia, when the land has a colonial history of environmental destruction. Butchart Gardens is a part of Tod Inlet, or SṈIDȻEⱢ, in Central Saanich, which is a traditional place used by the W̱SÁNEĆ First Nations. The land used to be plentiful, and some parts of Tod Inlet are still used for the gathering of plants today.[18] In 1904, Robert Butchart, an industrialist, established the Vancouver Portland Cement Company, using many acres of SṈIDȻEⱢ for a limestone quarry.

16. Robert Youds, personal interview by Naomi Kennedy.
17. For example, only an estimated 85 per cent of households are eligible for broadband Internet, leaving rural areas and marginalized populations in the lurch. Graham Templeton, "If Canada's Internet Is so Great, Why Are so Many People Still without It?," *Motherboard*, September 19, 2015, https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/wnjvmx/if-canadas-internet-is-so-great-why-are-so-many-people-still-without-it.
18. SeaChange Marine Conservation Society, "Place of the Blue Grouse," http://seachangesociety.com/place-of-the-blue-grouse/.

This eventually led to the environmental degradation of the lands and seafloor of the inlet. By 1909, the limestone deposits were exhausted. While European labourers who worked for Butchart were provided housing upon employment, Sikh and Chinese labourers set up their own makeshift housing just outside of the quarry.[19] Robert's wife, Jennie, in true Victorian fashion of the time, wanted to "beautify" the area and had the quarry filled with soil, thereby destroying parts of the Sikh and Chinese labourers' housing. Thus the first stage of what would become the national heritage site of Butchart Gardens, the sunken garden, was born out of the colonization of unceded territories and communities.

While both Safdie and Youds like the idealistic ideas of utopias, believing in their ability to change people's lives for the better, they are simultaneously doubtful of them. Though Safdie had high hopes for technology, he did not put his full faith into it: "If we want to stop pollution, sprawl, destruction of the land, then we, individually and collectively, must be willing to pay for it. There is no magic formula, no miracle technology, no wonder material, no automation, or any other trick to sidestep this fact." [20] Meanwhile, Youds explains, "I want to believe in the platform for change. There is suspiciousness, as there should be."[21] *For Everyone a Fountain* lets us experience a perfect utopia created with technology and a colourful aesthetic but also hints at the considerable collateral damage that supports such ventures.

REGAN SHRUMM

April 2018

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19. Heather Scott, "The Many Perspectives of Tod Inlet (SṈIDȻEȽ)," Victoria and Region Community Green Map, http://crdcommunitygreenmap.ca/story/many-perspectives-tod-inlet-s%E1%B9%89id%C8%BCe%C6%9A.
20. Safdie, 21.
21. Robert Youds, artist talk at Open Space.