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Back in the '90s, when eBay was still new, I typed "Plasticville" into the site's search engine and discovered I wasn't alone. The computer screen lit up with hits—there were hundreds of people out there trading in these miniature, cheerfully colored plastic buildings manufactured by Bachmann Bros. in the 1950s to accompany model train sets.

It was disheartening at first—I'd always viewed my Plasticville attraction as a hallmark of my unique taste. And buying online felt too easy, like cheating, after years spent wandering thrift shops and flea markets in search of the perfect schoolhouse or hospital. Yet, after I scrolled through the items, I couldn't help but bid on two powder-blue trailers with which I planned to start a trailer park. I was determined to turn my collection into something exceptional. I would become the Donald Trump of toy real estate.

Fortunately, collecting Plasticville posed about the same financial risk as playing the nickel slots in Vegas. A few rare items, such as the Turnpike Interchange in mint condition, can fetch up to \$150, but most of it's affordable. I could buy an entire supermarket for the cost of lunch.

**EVER SINCE I WAS 13**—around the time I rescued my first Plasticville ranch house, gas station, and dairy barn from my older brother's train set—I'd wanted to be an architect. Each weekend I would visit a tract development near my home in Los Angeles, where new construction was the norm. I loved seeing how, with a few structural alterations, uniform stucco boxes became English Tudors or Georgian colonials. My favorite, the "modern" house, was essentially the stucco box without embellishments.

Like most boys in the '50s, I was enamored of everything modern: passenger jets, cars with tail fins, glass and steel high-rises. Postwar optimism was palpable then, and the promise, if not the reality, of happiness and prosperity for all Americans was everywhere evident. Plasticville captured that idealized vision. Ads for the toys showed smiling family members gazing down onto an orderly little world with no pollution, crime, or overcrowding—the kind of utopian, problem-free society that can only be achieved in the human imagination. From the fictional Shangri-La to Frank Lloyd Wright's misguided plans for blending farmland with office towers in Broadacre City, utopias are poignant for their impossibility as much as their drive to create a perfect world.

Similarly, my eventual attempt at an

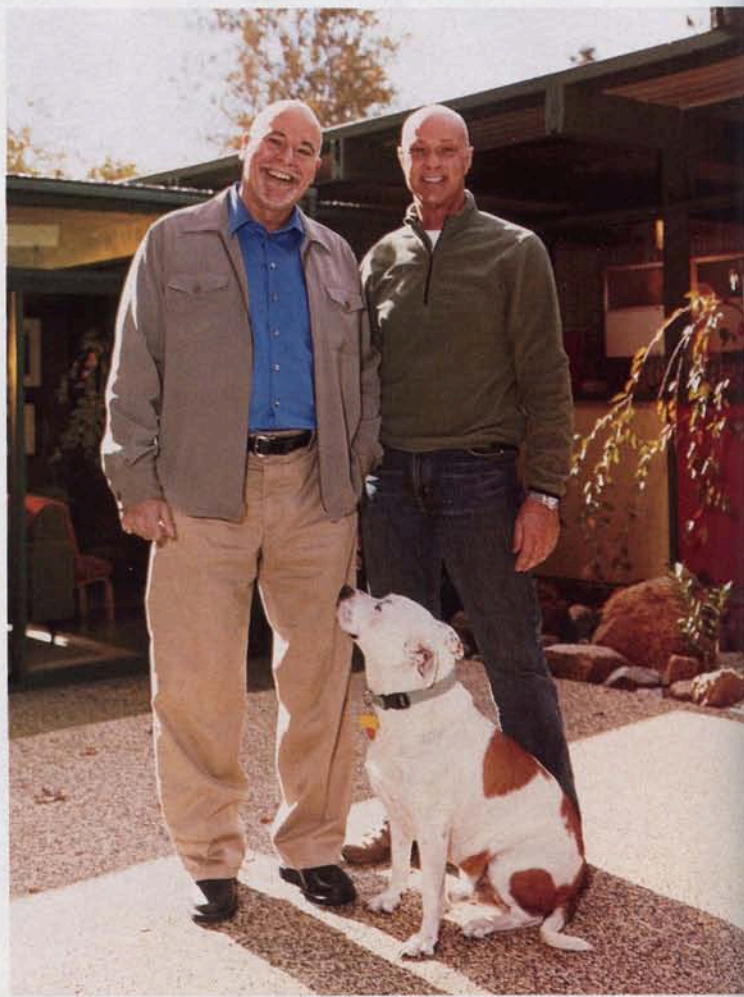
architecture degree was a bust. Calculus left me baffled, and my idea of structural engineering was snapping together notched walls and then setting a plastic roof on top. To sum it up, I couldn't translate the fantasy of Plasticville into the demands of the real world. After one semester, I decided to pursue visual arts and writing, fields for which impracticality is better suited.

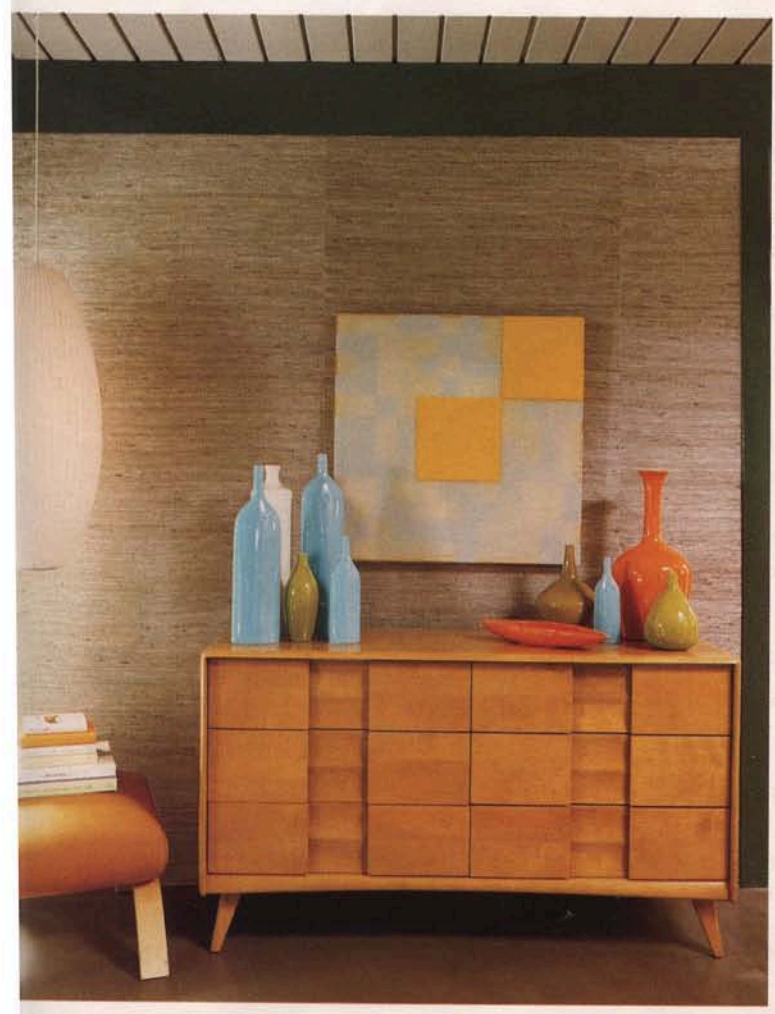
## AT PRESENT, MY PLASTICVILLE COLLECTION

contains just about every building Bachmann produced. It also includes cars, streetlights, and the town's plastic inhabitants. For over 20 years, the entire collection has been displayed in a wall of glass cases in my Hollywood home. But because of a new and unexpected architectural passion, I've had to put many of my model houses back in their boxes.

A year ago, a couple I know sent me to a real estate site to see pictures of a home they wanted to buy. While scrolling through the listings, I came upon a dream house of my own in the San Gabriel Mountains. Architect Richard Leitch, who taught at the University of Southern California, designed the post-and-beam residence for his family in 1954. He was inspired by Richard Neutra, whose open floor plans, integrating indoors and outdoors, took

**THIS PAGE:** The author, Bernard Cooper (left), with his partner, Joel Miller, and their dog, Cubby. **OPPOSITE PAGE** (clockwise from top left): Snake plants add life to the front porch; the family room is furnished with mid-century Heywood-Wakefield pieces and a Lari Pittman painting; safety posters from 1963 hang in the kitchen; contemporary ceramics by Kenneth Wingard and a painting by Daniel Aksten brighten the living room. **PREVIOUS SPREAD:** A view of Cooper's 1954 home from the top of the driveway (left) and a few ranch houses from his Plasticville collection.







## Collecting Plasticville

Bernard Cooper has transferred his passion for toy houses to his real-life home, and, considering his competitive spirit, that's good news for anyone looking to collect Plasticville.

**What it is:** Bachmann Bros. (later Bachmann Industries) has been making these model buildings, meant to accompany "O Scale" toy trains (sets with tracks 1/4 inch apart), since 1947.

**What to look for:** Bachmann has manufactured more than 200 Plasticville buildings and accessories, which are always more valuable if in good condition and accompanied by the original box. For reference, check out O'Brien's *Collecting Toy Trains: Identification and Value Guide* or Bill Nole's *Classic Guide to Vintage "O" Plasticville*.

**Where to find it:** New pieces are available at toy-train and hobby shops. Hobbyist and auction Web sites are great for tracking down earlier models.

**What it costs:** New buildings sell for between \$10 and \$42 each, and you can expect a mint-condition older building to be priced between \$10 and \$150.

**For more info:** Log on to the Web site for the Plasticville Collectors Association, [plasticvilleusa.org](http://plasticvilleusa.org).



**THIS PAGE:** Karen Carson's art piece "Green Valley" hangs above some of Cooper's Plasticville homes, on temporary display in the library. **OPPOSITE PAGE** (clockwise from top): Philippe Starck's Bubble Club armchairs and sofa encircle a Bruno Rainaldi bench from Design Within Reach; bedding by DwellStudio for Target and Alexis Smith's collage "Boy's Life" add playful touches to the master bedroom; original tile walls surround a Heywood-Wakefield table in the kitchen.

advantage of the West Coast's temperate weather.

The current owner of the Leitch residence was an interior designer who both recognized and accentuated the Japanese simplicity at the heart of the architect's design. She enclosed the main atrium in what appear to be rice-paper screens but are actually sheets of white Plexiglas. She planted Japanese maples and used rocks and gravel to suggest a Zen garden.

It was the most peaceful home I had ever seen, and I needed a little peace—a little utopia—after living in an overcrowded L.A. neighborhood that was fast becoming blighted with graffiti and traffic and constant noise. I wanted the Leitch house with a single-minded determination that made bidding on plastic houses seem like, well, child's play.

Falling in love with the place was like falling in love with someone's picture on an Internet dating site: Chances were pretty high that the first meeting would lead to disappointment. I almost wanted to be disappointed; then I wouldn't have to put myself at the mercy of a volatile real estate market and leave an area of town where I'd lived for nearly 25 years.

The photographs hadn't been misleading. An expanse of windows filled the house with shady light. The flat roof seemed to levitate. Fixtures by designer George Nelson hung from the ceiling like futuristic Japanese lanterns. My feeling of being at home was

overwhelming, not only because I'd fantasized about living there, but also because I knew that everything I owned would fit into the rooms, both literally and visually, as though the move were meant to be.

In that first visit, the seller worried aloud that a new owner wouldn't appreciate the mid-century style she'd worked so hard to retain. She'd heard prospective buyers discussing heavy drapes and knotty pine kitchen cabinets, and she feared that the home's expansiveness would be lost. I'm not one to be poker-faced about the architecture I love, whether pint-size or life-size, and my enthusiasm for the house soon assured her that this sale was going to be, in the truest sense of the term, "as is."

I've now lived in the house for two months—more enamored than ever of its flowing floor plan and simple geometry. Yet, I still haven't decided where—or whether—to permanently display Plasticville. Although Leitch's design isn't without warm and even playful touches, its simplicity demands a relatively spare aesthetic. One unnecessary piece of furniture, one too many decorative elements, and the overall tranquility is compromised. The inhabitants must try to meet the home's demands as much as it meets theirs. I've come to realize that living in so exceptional a place requires not just the usual maintenance, but custodianship. For 20 years I was passionate about amassing a miniature city. Now my passion is the house that surrounds me. **D**