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Title

A World of Play: Architecture on the Carpet and the Work of Brenda and Robert Vale

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/06v9t36f>

Journal

Room One Thousand, 2(2)

ISSN

2328-4161

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Publication Date

2014

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Robert Vale and Lauren McQuiston

A World of Play

Architecture on the Carpet and the Work of
Brenda and Robert Vale

Vale, Brenda, and Robert Vale. *Architecture on the Carpet: The Curious Tale of Construction Toys and the Genesis of Modern Buildings*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2013.

Brenda and Robert Vale's recently published book, *Architecture on the Carpet: The Curious Tale of Construction Toys and the Genesis of Modern Buildings*, explores a distinct trope of culture, relating the built environment and consumer products. From early toy train sets, with their realistic depiction of quaint village life, to the relatively recent advent of the much more abstract and now ubiquitous Lego blocks, the Vales argue that the complex relationship between toys and designers is significant, not only by reflecting various points of view on design, but also by carrying the weight of the collective memory of children and adults who grew up with such construction sets. Focusing on about a dozen specific toys, the Vales attempt to understand each toy within the context of larger cultural concerns. They provide the reader with images of packaging and advertising, as well as examples of the architecture, structural thinking, and building technology considered to be most relevant to each set's inherent values, modes of construction, and general aesthetics. This evidence bolsters the cultural reading of

these objects as holding a direct correlation between a specific style of toy building set and the design ethos played out in the real world during a particular era. After analyzing a century of popular building-related toys in the context of evolving attitudes toward politics and nationalism, environment and technology, social values and memory, and the design and construction of buildings themselves, the question still remains: “Does the architecture drive the toy or does the toy reflect the architecture of the time?”¹ Regardless of the answer, a sense of nostalgia is latent in evaluating the architectural styles and values which have simultaneously evolved over the last century with the trends of material culture and social understanding that construction toys represent. This in turn also raises questions about the future of play and how our increased dependence on technology may affect future generations of builders and designers. In the book, the Vales focus on the history of construction toys as objects in the larger context of a similarly built world, souvenirs of our collective childhood experience. But these responses to our questions remind us that these objects and memories are also about the importance of play in modern society.

In the genesis story of designers, it is not uncommon for an architect to include memories of his or her favorite childhood construction toy. The Vales provide the example of Norman Foster and Richard Rogers having both played with Meccano as children, a British designed toy with a particularly machine like aesthetic.² Some of the sets discussed in *Architecture on the Carpet* include specific instructions for completing a reproducible product with an expected outcome, an English castle or distinctly American log cabin. These toys express a romanticized attitude toward the past despite being products of modern mass production and consumerism.³ Others, like Playplax and Legos, allow for more abstract thinking and the creation of fantastical structures and imaginary environments. Both have since been recognized as designed objects

in and of themselves, with Playplax being featured in the New York Museum of Modern Art's collection.⁴ Many people have had formative experiences playing with toys as children, which allowed them to both learn skills while also using their imagination. The authors admit they are collectors and recount their own experiences of play.

Like buildings and their architects, toys project the values of their creators. The simultaneity of experiencing the spaces of everyday life and the ability to recreate and explore those spaces in the form of play reinforces the power of such objects to impact the world around them. One cannot help but wonder how the material culture of today will be reflected in our future environment. What types of designers and architects will the toys of today produce? Personal technology such as smart phones and interactive tablets facilitate connectivity and new ways of thinking and making. Virtual reality allows for the creation of individual and personally customizable digital environments at little to no cost. There are few limits to the imagination when interfacing with the digital world; however, the shared experience of emptying a bucket of blocks onto the floor and creating a physical artifact with your childhood friends, siblings, or parents cannot be replaced by these computerized alternatives.

Nostalgic memories of childhood are tied to the objects with which we interacted and the environments in which we played. In many ways, these memories seem to stick with us, especially as designers who take on the adult tasks of creating the world around us. The Vales' *Architecture on the Carpet* provides an extensive catalogue and appreciation for the most influential construction toys of the past and present, which have clearly evolved with modern culture. It also raises questions about what form and to what benefit toys such as these will have in a world increasingly centered on digital media and entertainment.

Lauren McQuiston from Room One Thousand interviewed Robert Vale, to discuss the topics of architecture, material culture, active engagement in design, play as raised in their book, and to ask about their personal experiences with construction sets:

Lauren McQuiston: Architecture on the Carpet celebrates the impact of construction toys on the architecture of the recent past as well as the joy that such toys bring to children of all ages. What is the most important contribution you feel can be attributed to construction and design related to toys in modern architectural thinking and/or practice? And, why do you think construction toys appeal to so many?

Robert Vale: These are hard questions to answer because I think that construction toys probably have contributed only negatively to modern architectural thinking. The only really widespread contemporary construction toy with a focus on buildings is Lego, and it is very hard to argue that Lego's influence, assuming that it has had an influence, has been beneficial. I think this is because Lego needs little or no structural understanding. The individual bricks lock together, making it possible to build buildings that would not stand up when built full-size and with real materials. I think this has contributed (admittedly with no hard evidence to back this up) to architects having an attitude that anything is possible, resulting in buildings that are styling exercises, rather than in buildings evolved from a consideration of how materials are used and combined to create spaces. You can dream up a form and with the help of clever engineers, construction experts, and with a lot of hidden internal framing, get it to stand up as a building.

Lego bricks with their locking studs can be contrasted with the nineteenth century Richter's Anker-Steinbaukasten (still available today) that also have blocks in many shapes, just like Lego. Unlike a Lego building though, a Richter building has to rely entirely on gravity and the skill of its builder to remain standing. This teaches lessons

about form, structure, span, corbelling and so on. An example: When we visited the London suburb of Gidea Park, the result of a housing competition in 1910, I was struck by how much better the traditionally built houses (the ones like Richter's blocks) had lasted and weathered, compared with the more Lego-like Modernist part of the same suburb, built as the result of another competition in 1934. Buildings designed and built by people with a knowledge of traditional materials and how they work together definitely seem to have lasted much better than buildings that are more stylistically driven.

As for why people play with construction toys, they probably appeal to the creative impulse that seems to be pretty widespread. They are also physical and three-dimensional, as opposed to being electronic images, so they can be used to interact with other toys like cars or animals or people. And they are a lot of fun.

LM: When did you first become interested in construction toys as an area of academic research? Were they part of your personal childhood experiences?

RV: Our research into sustainability, which we had started in the very early 1970s, had begun to get us quite depressed. We could see that there were plenty of practical solutions to the world's environmental problems and little interest in adopting them. We had always enjoyed construction toys and got interested in the possibilities of construction toys as an area of academic research (and a way of avoiding terminal depression about the fate of the planet) when we found that Lott's Bricks had employed the Arts and Crafts architect Arnold Mitchell to design what could be built with their bricks. The Arts and Crafts movement had always been a great architectural influence on us, so the link between the two things seemed an obvious one to explore.

LM: How would you define the term “nostalgia”? As professors of architecture, what role does nostalgia play in design education?

RV: I love nostalgia. It is a delicate yearning that draws us back to a time when we imagine that things were simpler. Every age seems to have had a vision of a “golden age” in the past, even if it was not actually perceived as very golden at the time. We now get nostalgic about the 1950s. Our recent research in ecological footprint studies has shown that nostalgia may be a good thing. One of our students found that the ecological footprint of life in the 1950s was much smaller than that of today, although people then were no less happy than they are now. So nostalgia may not be only a fantasy, the golden age might really have been more golden in some ways.

LM: How do you think nostalgic memories of construction toys have impacted your own interests in architectural design?

RV: When I started as an architecture student in 1967, I came to the subject with little background knowledge. Before I started the architecture course, the Admissions Tutor recommended I read Giedion’s *Space, Time and Architecture*. Once I started the Architecture course I found it very absorbing, but once we had learned about the Arts and Crafts Movement there did not seem any reason to go further in Architectural Theory. The Arts and Crafts approach seemed so logical and rational compared to anything that came after it. Most of the Modernist houses we learned about were made of the same materials as Arts and Crafts houses but were then plastered over and painted white to get the preferred styling. Quite possibly my liking for the Arts and Crafts was because that was the kind of building I used to make with my Minibrix. When I started designing buildings in real life I could

never bring myself to make the irrational decisions necessary to follow the latest architectural styles, so the buildings were always in the Arts and Crafts manner.

LM: How do you perceive the value of creative play for children, students, and design professionals in contemporary culture? Is this value increasing over time? Decreasing?

RV: The value is great and is not increasing or decreasing. Although the value of play does not decrease, the opportunities for play probably do decrease, as do the opportunities for physical play with real three-dimensional objects.

LM: In conducting your research into the history of construction toys, were there any topics that you encountered that you wish to pursue further?

RV: Yes, I am fascinated by the very clear link between model railways and Modernism and am pursuing that at present. It is a perfect excuse to collect 1950s model trains.

Brenda and Robert Vale are both professors of Architecture at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand where they conduct research on sustainable design. They are avid collectors of construction toys and published

Lauren McQuiston is a Masters of Architecture student and artist currently studying at UC Berkeley's College of Environmental Design.

[Endnotes]

1 Vale, Brenda, and Robert Vale. *Architecture on the Carpet: The Curious Tale of Construction Toys and the Genesis of Modern Buildings*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2013. 189.

2 Vale, Brenda, and Robert Vale. page 38.

3 Vale, Brenda, and Robert Vale. page 30.

4 Vale, Brenda, and Robert Vale. page 165.

[Chapter figures part of "Souvenir Nostalgia Photo Series." Photograph by Andrew Manuel. 2014.]