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Joyce Owens Lego

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ARCHITECTURE ON THE CARPET

Construction toys a foundation for professionals
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- Lincoln Logs.
 - Lego bricks.
 - Wooden blocks.
 - Erector sets.
- Most of us played with some form of construction toys when we were little.

But some of us kept building — and the materials became much more expensive, and the buildings became, well, life-sized. Architects are fascinated by form and function, line and beauty, space and light. They delight in texture and structure.

And according to Brenda and Robert Vale, architects' earliest education came from those construction sets. In some cases these toys influenced the architect's style and design. The husband and wife, in addition to being architects themselves (and experts in the field of sustainability), are lifelong collectors of construction toys. They combine the two passions in their book "Architecture on the Carpet: The Curious Tale of Construction Toys and The Genesis of Modern Buildings" (\$27.95, Thames & Hudson).

The book, which is chock-full of research, even includes a chapter on Playplax, which is not officially a construction toy, but simply colored translucent squares of polystyrene that can be interlocked or combined in various ways. (The toy is part of the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, where kits are sold in the gift shop.)

The book's not lacking in humor either. Here is how the chapter on Lego begins: "Of all the construction toys described in this book, Lego is probably the best known. There cannot be many middle-class parents over the last 50 years who do not know what it feels like to step with bare feet onto an unexpected Lego brick lying in wait on the carpet." (The authors go on to note that in 2000 Lego was named "Toy of the Century" by Fortune magazine and by the Toy Retailers Association in Britain.)

We emailed some questions to the couple, who are professors of architecture at the Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. Mr. Vale was unavailable, but Mrs. Vale answered our questions. Here's what she had to say:

Q: How did you become inspired to write "Architecture on the Carpet"?

A: Although we had sets of construction toys, Robert collected a lot of Meccano after we came to New Zealand in 1996. (Meccano is similar to the U.S. Erector Set originating in 1913; Meccano was first marketed in 1901 in the UK.)

One lot he bought in an antique shop closing down in Christchurch and we had to bring it home on the plane. He was stopped at security and the package was passed through screening a couple of times. We could see things getting a bit sticky, but one of the older guys came across and told the officer in charge that it was fine — it was just "metal Lego." This was intriguing, as we realized there were younger people who had never played with some of the sets we had. I think it was probably then we wondered whether we could write something about them, so that was the point we began some more serious research. But the book was to come several years later.



Above: The Lego green city. Left: Meccano's Giant Blocksetting Crane
Below: Noddy's postmodern kit-built house and garage
COURTESY PHOTOS / PAUL HILLIER



Where's the story?



6 Points Mentioned

Q; You say that children's building sets reflect different styles, but also influenced the careers of some who grew up playing with them. Can you elaborate on that?

A: Both Sir Norman Foster, designer of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank in Hong Kong and Sir Richard Rogers, designer of the Pompidou Centre in Paris, say in their biographies that Meccano was influential on their design. Both architects like to express the engineering of the building, so the way the building is constructed becomes the aesthetic of the architecture. The German modernist pioneer Walter Gropius, designer of the Bauhaus, played with German Richter Blocks and claimed these influenced him – certainly he had a lifelong interest in making prefabricated buildings. And one things construction sets teach is that buildings can be constructed from modular components. Gropius was never successful in his prefabrication ventures, however, but then few architects are.



Q: You're both architects. What architecture toys did you play with?

A: Robert owned and played with Minibrix (bricks with studs that interlock like Lego but that are made of rubber, and with folded rubber roofs that tend to sag...) I played with Bayko, but it was owned by a friend, and another of my friends had Lott's Bricks. I only had simple modular wooden bricks, with which of course you can build anything with imagination.

Minibrix, Bayko and Lott's Bricks make very modest English-looking houses, and our architecture has always tended to be modest, to try to fit in with what is around it, though at the same time to be very energy saving. We designed a lot of houses and small commercial buildings in the UK in the 1980s that saved 80 percent of the energy to run them at no extra construction cost. To do this, the buildings had to be simple in their form. One thing I recall a quantity surveyor saying early in our career as architects was that walls were cheap and corners were expensive, so keeping things simple saves money.

Q: How have construction toys changed over the years?

A: Wooden blocks have been around the longest and are found in many countries, but the first real marketing was of German Richter Blocks at the end of the 19th century. These soon became a global product.

Model train sets (Merklin) were also marketed around this time, and it was

Mrs. Merklin who pushed this. The German toy industry, originally craftbased but still exporting its products worldwide, was the first to use mass production, particularly of tin-plate toys, after discovering the process of chromolithography. This meant cheap printing of bright colors and intricate patterns on metal and paper.

In the U.S. John Wright, son of Frank Lloyd Wright, developed and sold Lincoln Logs, which seem very American in the way they build log cabins.

Now the toy market is dominated by giants Mattel and Hasbro. (Hasbro now holds Lincoln Logs.) And even Lego has struggled recently. I think this market domination makes it harder to have the wide variety of construction toys that were available in the first half of the 20th century.

One huge change is in the instructions that come with construction sets. In the past there were usually a few generic pictures of how the bits fitted together and then there were pictures of finished buildings you were supposed to be able to copy. If you were lucky, you'd get a list of parts that will make the building illustrated, and occasionally a plan of the first layer of the building. This is a long way from modern Lego, where instructions are given for the placing of every brick.

Q: Your last chapter asks: Does architecture drive the toy, or does the toy reflect the architecture of the time? What conclusion did you come to?

A: I am currently researching and writing about dolls' houses that I hope will also become a book in time. Here you would expect to find a direct reflection between a dolls' house and the typical houses of the period. To an extent this does happen, but equally you can find examples of dolls' houses that are nothing like the houses children might have been living in for the same date.

The construction sets are somewhat different as usually they can be made to construct more than one type of building. (Lincoln Logs are an exception here.) Some, like the US Bilt-E-Z (1920s) make terrific sky scrapers and other urban modernist buildings, whereas UK plastic Bayko (1934) made superb UK suburban houses but could also later come with a "dome" piece and instructions for building a mosque, which would seem outside the experience of the average child in the UK.


I think the most serious answer is that playing with modular construction sets teaches a lot about the process of building. This might be more significant than what can be built with the sets. |

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All will have a chance to attract financial and creative investments.

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Anyone that applies will automatically be entered to win an Android tablet. 2 random drawings. 2 tablets, 2 chances to win.

The deadline to apply is **August 1st, 2014**.



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in the know

Architects and their toys

We asked some local architects what construction toys they may have played with when they were children. Here's what they had to say.

STEPHEN HRUBY

Founding principal

Architects Unlimited, Naples

I was a collector of blocks. All kinds: Lincoln logs, Block City, Brick City ... You name it, I probably had a set. As an only child living in a rural area in Pennsylvania, I spent hours building fantasy cities with my blocks and small model trucks and cars. It was my make-believe world.

I guess that had some impact in me becoming not only an architect but an urban designer as well. I'm still envisioning urban environments, only on a real scale now.

And I still play with architectural toys. My wife only buys me one gift: Lego architecture bricks. I'm collecting and building the entire collection.

JOYCE OWENS

Architect and director

Architecture Joyce

Owens, Fort Myers and Naples

I have four brothers. We played with Lincoln Logs and the Erector set, building buildings to go on the big — it was really big! — family train set. We also made a

lot of forts. I wasn't a girly-type. I didn't have a Barbie doll. I had to keep up with my brothers, whatever they were doing. I never thought I'd be an architect, though. I thought I'd be a veterinarian.



OWENS

ELAINE MILLER

President

Suncoast Architect Inc., Englewood

I never, ever played with Lego bricks. I never thought about being an architect until I was a young adult. I didn't know I had a predisposition to construction.

The only toy I played with that I could relate to construction would be Tinkertoys. I was totally enthralled with them and the patterns of geometry that could be created.



MILLER

The Design a Building Challenge

We were curious to see how the three architects above would play as adults, so we provided them each with the same Lego kit. However, we threw away the box, so they have no idea what the building is supposed to look like.

We want them to create a building of their own design, using only the Lego blocks and their own imagination and expertise.

We gave them a week in which to complete their project. Next week, we'll show you what they came up with.