

origins by their commercialization.

In discussing the financial and cultural success of fitness clubs, both Black and McKenzie note the influence of sociologist Ray Oldenburg's concept of a "third place"—separate from work and home—as a locus of social and communal cohesion to combat the dislocating influences of modernity. And both books end on a note examining the future of fitness. They argue that contemporary fitness is seen not as a joyous, recreational activity, but as work, as something to be subjugated and checked off our daily list as an expression of our ability to master a demanding, complex, modern world. In this regard, while both clearly argue that fitness is securely ensconced in contemporary American culture, its benefits will continue to accrue mostly to those with the mentality, disposable income, and leisure time of the financial and social elite.

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**Architecture on the Carpet:  
The Curious Tale of  
Construction Toys and the  
Genesis of Modern Buildings**

*Brenda Vale and Robert Vale*  
London: Thames & Hudson, 2013.  
Notes, images, acknowledgements, index.  
208 pp. \$27.95 cloth.  
ISBN: 9780500342855

Professors of architecture and experts in sustainable design, Brenda Vale and Robert Vale place new foundations in the field of twentieth-century toys with their most

recent book *Architecture on the Carpet: The Curious Tale of Construction Toys and the Genesis of Modern Buildings*. The authors take a nuanced approach that leads to few outright conclusions about the subject but rather to more questions about whether architecture inspires the toy or vice versa, about how toys inform child development, and about the extent to which consumer society influences toy design.

Ranging from Richter's stone blocks (actually, a composite of chalk, sand, and linseed oil) to plastic LEGOs (acrylonitrile butadiene styrene), the authors capture a broad spectrum of the types of construction and materials common to these toys. Through this survey, they make some innovative observations: Lincoln Logs "mimicked how such buildings are fundamentally constructed" (p. 80); "the Dutch [Mobaco] is an elegant system that makes models only superficially similar to buildings children would see, whereas the English [Bayko] is a complex and rather pragmatic system that makes quite accurate replicas of very familiar buildings" (p. 92); and Castos were a "model of the process of making concrete" (p. 144). Thus, toy design has to balance accuracy with assembly.

Throughout the book, the authors supply facts gleaned from playing with the objects. For example, it is impossible to build higher than ten units in Playplex, and it is difficult not to bend the rods in constructing with Bayko. Because they draw primarily from their personal collection, it is easy to spot the toys that inspired them. Despite relying heavily on their own collection, they do mention the National Building Museum's collection, but they overlook collections at other cultural institutions, such as that at The

Strong museum; they prefer citing collectors rather than curators, insisting that bayko.org.uk or brickfetish.com are veritable encyclopedias.

The book skillfully weaves materials and visual items, such as the boxes and instruction manuals of the toys, together with physical architecture and information from trade journals. Fourteen roughly chronological chapters follow a formula that makes the book accessible to readers interested in a single construction toy or a quick read. Each short chapter begins with a toy, gives a physical description and its design history, then reveals the toy's role in an issue important to the current architectural profession, such as industrialization, everyday architecture, Cold War architecture, suburbia, and sustainability. For instance, the authors use Wenebrik to explore the rarity of metal buildings and, according to them, how it quickly ages in both toys and buildings.

Using artifacts as starting points allows the authors to explore an array of cultural and architectural topics in a way familiar to material culture studies. But the informal style of the book avoids typical academic tools, like a literature review or a methodological description, so whether the authors actually intended to employ a material culture approach remains unclear. The book might well have offered a timely contribution to children's material culture, given the resurgence of scholarship through events like Juliet Kinchin's 2012 Museum of Modern Art exhibit, *Century of the Child: Growing by Design, 1900–2000*, or Amy Ogata's 2013 *Designing the Creative Child: Playthings and Places in Midcentury America*. But the authors here pay too little attention to the research in this area (with the excep-

tions of the findings of Ray Merlock and Maaïke Lauwaert). Instead, the book relies on the authors' admittedly rich architectural backgrounds.

As a result, not only will the book appeal to toy experts, but architects also will enjoy it. Indeed, both will likely learn something about architecture and construction toys, and the book suffices as an introduction to several topical themes in architecture. Highlights of modern and postmodern architecture are contrasted with vernacular structures like British railway stations and castles on the Rhine. There is even a chapter on obscure, unassuming architects Charles Winmill, George Topham Forrest, and Edwin Gunn, whose fire stations, schools, and cowsheds made up the everyday architecture of Minibrix. On top of the extensive references to built architecture, the authors refer to popular theories from several disciplines, covering everything from the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM) to Henry David Thoreau to String Theory. I wish, however, the authors had focused a little more on contemporary disciplines—such as child development—that has most likely influenced toy designers.

Some of the authors' assertions are speculative and would benefit from a better sense of the research on the topic. They gloss over themes of design and ownership, as well as the didactic roles of toys, in favor of a more expansive account of twentieth-century toys. For example, they attribute the cleanliness of Bayko to the fact that its creator was in a sanatorium, but they do not contextualize this claim within larger trends. Cleanliness in toys is a pervasive theme in domestic economy manuals. Earlier publications, like architectural his-

torian Alice Friedman's *Dream Houses, Toy Homes* (1995), show how Harbutt's *Plastiline Builder* (produced twenty years before Bayko) emphasizes its antiseptic nature.

The telling image of a girl holding a doll and a boy showing his Bakyo house with the names of male and female authors on the cover led me to expect a careful treatment of gender. However, the authors only touch upon how the images of girls and women changed on the boxes and instructions of *Minibrix*, discussing how their role evolved from passive bystander to active builders by the 1950s. They postulate that "by this time the factory was already running into trouble—maybe that's why" (p. 111). And of *Castos* sets, the authors merely say that the manufacturers "encouraged [girls] to play a part in the great *Castos* project, and certainly when the builder comes to painting his finished model" and they fail to note that the part women were encouraged to play was mostly decorative (p. 144).

As Brenda Vale and Robert Vale testify, the toys that architects and architectural historians play with stay with them, but I would like to know more about the carpets on which they played with those toys, that is, the domestic context of their influence.

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### **Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game**

*Graeme Kirkpatrick*

New York: Manchester University Press, 2011. Images, bibliography, index. 247 pp. \$25.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780719077180

Graeme Kirkpatrick's study of aesthetic theory and video games seeks to apply aesthetic theory to what some view as a garish, popularized, and mass-produced cultural form. What do video games have to do with aesthetics after all? Kirkpatrick takes this question head on and argues that video games are a "historically specific instance of an aesthetic form," and as such they should be viewed through the lens aesthetics to be understood (p. 1). Over the course of six chapters, Kirkpatrick discusses the newness of what games bring to aesthetics. For the author, the newness of games is a specific way of approaching the text through the body, as a participant rather than as an audience.

Drawing on the work of Markku Eskelinen (a founder of *gamestudies.org*), Kirkpatrick demonstrates the difference between games and stories. As Eskelinen notes, when we are thrown a ball, we do not expect it to tell us stories. This example becomes Kirkpatrick's starting point for an exploration of games as texts that expect us to play along, take part in, and initiate the progress of the experience. He pushes Eskelinen's comments further by asserting that the act of playing can be meaningful without being subjected to interpretation. The act is its own meaning and its own goal.

Despite Kirkpatrick's initial claim that play does not have to be interpreted, he does commit interesting and thought-provoking acts of interpretation. For instance, in chapter 5, "Meaning in Virtual Worlds," he interprets the structure of video games as a constant revisiting of loss, and he points to how it is described as a joyless pleasure (p. 187). In this discussion, he demonstrates through strong and

Architecture on the Carpet: The Curious Tale of Construction Toys and the Genesis of Modern Buildings. by Brenda Vale. Details. An intriguing and nostalgic exploration of the relationships between children's building sets and developments in modern architecture. This entertaining book offers a novel view of architecture through the prism of construction toys. They explore connections between model-railway buildings and modernism; model sets such as Castos and reinforced concrete housing; and even between the creative but slightly surreal Playplax and postmodern deconstructivist architecture. 111 illustrations, 97 in color. There are no customer reviews for this item yet. Support Your Local Indie Bookstore. Architecture on the Carpet: The Curious Tale of Construction Toys and the Genesis of Modern Buildings. Brenda Vale and Robert Vale. London: Thames & Hudson, 2013. Professors of architecture and experts in sustainable design, Brenda Vale and Robert Vale place new foundations in the field of twentieth-century toys with their most recent book Architecture on the Carpet: The Curious Tale of Construction Toys and the Genesis of Modern Buildings. The authors take a nuanced approach that leads to few outright conclusions about the subject but rather to more questions about whether architecture inspires the toy or vice versa, about how toys inform child development, and about the extent to which consumer society influences toy design.