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BUILDING CITIES, BUILDING WORLDS: CITIES IN PLAY

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Introduction

From building blocks, to Lego kits, to the houses and hotels of *Monopoly*, miniatures of the city have always featured in children's play. Often the largest, most desired and most expensive items in a toy line, playsets, playmats and model villages enable children to play at being adults.

Through them, children become architects and planners of secondary worlds to protect and destroy, making the lounge room, the bedroom and the playroom urban topoi where the city itself becomes both an atmospheric and symbolic protagonist in play. In this paper I want to focus on playsets - toys that mobilize the old iconography of the city for new purposes. Drawing on Susan Stewart's notion of the miniature as a metaphor for interiority (1993) I want to use the playset to explore both the representation and function of the city in play. The bulk of the examples herein are American because as Eric Clark notes:

“the American toy industry dominates not just the United States but the whole of the globe. It is now a \$22 billion business, and although fewer than 4 per cent of the world's children are American, American children consume over 40 per cent of the world's toys” (10).

Origins

The origin of playsets is in the dolls' house and the building block – and the origin of the dolls' house is in the crèche (Stewart 61). While there is some evidence of miniature toys from antiquity (doll's beds, chairs and tables made from terracotta in Mesopotamia; small ceramic pots in a grave in Brescello Italy (Jaffe 156-7)) the first dolls' houses of the sixteenth century - 'cabinet-type houses' - were made for adults, in Bavaria and Germany – the *Dockenhaus* (meaning something small in German) (Jaffe 157).

As Deborah Jaffe notes: “Having been made as replicas or pastiches of real buildings and artefacts, they are fascinating historical illustrations of architectural detail... the variety in their styles is like a simplified summary of the history of architecture and interior design” (Jaffe 156) with perhaps the best known being Queen Mary's dolls' house currently exhibited in Windsor Castle.

The dolls' house became a popular toy throughout the nineteenth century, influenced by changing styles of architecture and the introduction of mass manufacturing technologies such as plastic, overtaking wood and metal. They became central features of fashion doll lines, like Barbie and Cindy, whose abundance of accessories required furniture and houses to accommodate them and featured parts of toy lines such as the *Sylvanian Families* and *Polly Pocket*.

In contrast, boys' had blocks and construction toys, largely derived from the work of the great educational reformer, Friedrich Froebel (1899) who together with Maria Montessori reconceptualised childhood as a period of exploration and learning. In 1889 Froebel introduced a system of simple, didactic 'Gifts', “toys based on the geometric shapes of a sphere, cube, triangle and rectangle... children would play with these toys and understand the fundamentals of geometry and arithmetic, which they could then transfer and hence discover how nature worked” (Jaffe 4).

Like dolls' houses, construction toys enabled children “to replicate, in miniature, the reality of the world” (Jaffe 104) and like dolls' houses too their popularity was fuelled by increased urbanisation, from the increase in suburban dwellings in post-Victorian Britain, to the expansion of cities in the USA – and the desire to replicate these changes in miniature.

But in practice construction toys were implicitly gendered toward boys (and, in the case of Meccano, explicitly), as they connected to knowledges that were understood as being masculine knowledges - mathematics, architecture, project development, mechanics and engineering. In this way a gendered demarcation was reinscribed between the domestic spaces of the dolls' house (feminine) and the urban space of the constructed city (masculine) which only occasionally interpenetrated in more complex construction systems like Lego and Playmobil that marketed dolls' houses and all manner of city components as part of the same range.

The link between building blocks and the city was epitomised by Warren Rasely from Boston, USA who produced a building toy composed of moveable buildings so children could experience "the development of a city and the juxtaposition of buildings" (Jaffe 107). According to Rasely in his 1921 patent:

"The present stage of our educational system is such that while there is great demand for teaching children about the largest civic centers (sic) of a country, yet no adequate means has been presented for conveying to their minds any proper understanding of the nature of these great cities unless they can visit them. Maps of the cities do not convey large meaning to those untrained minds and photographs of actual scenes or of buildings... do not tie together various objects which may be historically, civically, commercially... associated in reality" (Rasely qtd Jaffe 108)

For Rasely then, construction toys gave children an "impressionistic representation of the more important portions, buildings, streets, parks and other objects of interest... as a tourist might get upon casually viewing the city" (Rasely qtd Jaffe 108). Construction toys offered children a panoptic vision of the city, where they could not only see all but make and remake the city as they wished, giving them the ability to create and control.

Playsets

Throughout the fifties, developments in mass production, increases in the number of consumer products that could be replicated and greater media licensing contributed to the birth of a new "impressionistic representation" of the city: urban, predominantly male and at least partially constructed (in the sense that it had to be assembled) like building blocks, but representationally fixed (and later hinged, with multiple rooms), like a dolls' house: the playset.

At the forefront was Louis Marx and Company, a toy company that had been in operation since 1918 and became best known for their Western playsets John Marshall describes as "enormous dioramas consisting of toy soldier-style figures plus horses, cannons, buildings - in short, an entire world" (Marshall 49).

Marx, along with other companies like Ideal and Remco, produced more of these playsets based on popular series like *Rin Tin Tin*, *the Rifleman*, *Roy Rogers*, *Zorro*, *Lost in Space* and *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*. In this way representations of the city, which had always slavishly followed architectural trends, began to slip between time periods so that the symbolic city could just as easily be Dalton City as New York, a moonscape as much as a cityscape. The symbolic city now included the fantastic, the exotic and the unreal city. But as Stewart explains: "the image that is produced [in this case by these playsets] not only bears tangible qualities of material reality but also serves as a representation, an image, of a reality which does not exist. The referent here is most often the fantastic, yet the fantastic is in fact given 'life' by its miniaturization. Although we cannot miniaturise what has not had material being in the first place, we can align the fantastic to the real and thereby miniaturise it by displacement" (Stewart 60).

Just as importantly, playsets were indoor toys, pointing to the increased inner-city and suburban living of most families and an important shift in the wider culture, from a culture of production, with its demands of discipline and regimentation, towards a culture of consumption, with its expectations of a "fun morality" where "fun has tended to become obligatory" (Wolfenstein 1998, 199), largely motivated by the expansion of the marketplace and growing suburban affluence¹. This ushered in a paradigm of permissiveness, perhaps best embodied in the work of Dr Spock (see Strickland and Ambrose 1985), where play became a central element of children's culture and children's culture as a whole was reframed as that "sphere" Henry Giroux describes as being "where *entertainment, advocacy and pleasure* meet to construct conceptions of what it means to be a child occupying a

combination of gender, racial and class positions in society” (Giroux 1996, 89, emphasis added). Reconceived as an object of play, the city is transformed from a space of “work to play, from utility to aesthetics, from ends to means” (Stewart 59).

Ironically, the popularity of the playset was to receive an additional boost from the Arabian oil crisis and the OPEC oil embargo of 1976 where the prohibitive cost of petroleum forced the price of raw plastic even higher and therefore compelled toy manufacturers to reduce the size of their toys.

The Kenner toy company capitalised on this change in scale with their acquisition of the *Star Wars* license and their 1977 *Star Wars* range was to impact the toy industry in a number of ways. It suggested a new format for boy’s toys - the 3 ¾ inch action figure that could be used in scale playsets and vehicles impossible to construct at the larger 11 inch format.

Perennial topline *G.I. Joe* relaunched in 1982, in the window between the release of *Star Wars* instalments *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*, as an entire line of 3 ¾ inch figures - a futuristic elite Army unit. Like *Star Wars* the smaller size meant the line could include many vehicles and increasingly complex (and expensive) playsets that would have been impossible at their previous 11½ size, from the Cobra Terror Dome (with Firebat experimental fast-attack jet, 1986) to the Defiant: Space Vehicle Launch Complex (1987) to the infamous 7.5 foot aircraft carrier the USS Flagg (1985).

Perhaps even more importantly, like the Marx playsets before them, the playsets of *Star Wars* and *G.I. Joe* enabled children to theme space, making the lounge, bed and play rooms modular battlefields, alien worlds and western cities. In this way the playset – and more particularly multiple playsets – made manifest the possibility of the miniature to assume, in Stewart’s terms, “an anthropocentric universe for its absolute sense of scale” (56). Here were miniature worlds with multiple locations, plots and subplots and hundreds of different characters – all in 3 ¾ inch scale.

Similarly, playsets conflate space, bringing the exteriority of the urban into the domestic interior, inviting the child into an unintended, ironic and decidedly postmodern approach to urban planning. Being a toy means that the playset enables the child to explore an “interior world, lending itself to fantasy and privacy in a way the abstract space, the playground, of social play does not” (Stewart 56). Like the dolls’ houses to which Stewart refers, the playset “articulates the tension between inner and outer spheres, of exteriority and interiority – it also represents the tension between two modes of interiority” (Stewart 61). Playsets therefore become ways of mapping space, of exploring the exterior world through interior play and in so doing, explore the interior world of the child and their developing relationship with the urban. (Pile?)

The possibilities of the playset were realized with Mattel’s *Masters of the Universe* topline. The *MOTU* action figures were developed as a media tie-in, a license Mattel had acquired for *Conan the Barbarian* (Universal 1982) starring Arnold Schwarzenegger (Sweet & Wecker, 77). But deciding the movie was too violent and sexual for their target audience, Mattel took the lead barbarian character, gave him a blond Prince Valiant style haircut and placed him in a science fiction/sword-and-sorcery world. According to toy designer Roger Sweet, he was given the name “He-Man” as it was generic enough to fit into any context (Sweet & Wecker 2005, 24). An “ancient-looking, barbarian-esque skull castle” became the “play set centrepiece (sic)” (Sweet & Wecker, 76), hinged and multi-roomed like a dollhouse – and one of the most famous playsets of all time, Castle Grayskull.

Just as the city functions as signifier of modernity, the castle is the mediaeval signifier of society, the political centre of premodern civilization. The fusion of science fiction and fantasy has the added effect of infusing Grayskull with a sense of modernity; behind its grim skull were lazer weapons and advanced technology – the scientific and technological processes identified as being parts of modernity. Just as the playset conflates space, so does a playset like Grayskull conflate ideas of society, modernity and progress, almost an impressionistic idea of the city that still focuses as a potent symbol of civilisation, the iconography of the city mobilized for a new purpose. Unlike other miniatures the playset is also a toy and as Stewart defines toys, they are “the physical embodiment of the fiction:... a device for fantasy, a point of beginning for narrative” (56).

Like *Star Wars* and *G.I. Joe* before it, *MOTU* was a massive success, rumoured to have brought in sales of \$1.2 billion, earning \$400million in just three years (Sweet & Wecker 2005, 147). *MOTU*

created not only a marketing template that would be cloned (with less success) by subsequent toy lines but also a narrative that would resonate throughout toy lines of the 80s, that of the modern society that has lapsed into a premodern state. The one representation of modernity and civilization in the face of barbarism and invasion, the last chance of restoring society, is through possession of the ubiquitous playset.

At the heart of *MOTU* and subsequent toy lines then, there is a yearning for the city and all that the city represents. In their miniaturisation of the city, later 80s playsets actually reconceptualise aspects of the city as safe for play -

a police station becomes the Police Academy Precinct, a fire station becomes the Ghostbusters headquarters, a tenement building becomes the A-Team's Command Center (sic), a sewer system becomes the home of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and it is this Sewer Playset which sees the end of the playset as a feature of toy lines. With oil prices once again increasing the price of plastics, playsets become increasingly rare throughout the nineties, more often replaced by the digital landscapes of SimCity, Resident Evil's Raccoon City and Halo's Reach.

Conclusion

The function of the miniature according to Susan Stewart, is to present "a diminutive, and thereby manipulatable, version of experience, a version which is domesticated and protected from contamination" (Stewart 69). In the case of the playset, play permits the city to be made and remade, enabling a child to experience ideas of urbanity, panopticism, acquisition and modernity in the safety of their own home.

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ⁱ Thomas Doherty provides an overview of the rise of teenage consumer culture in this period. See Doherty, Thomas. 1988. *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.