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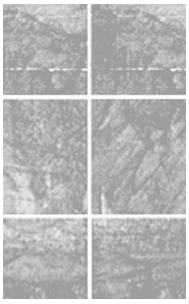

ARTICLE

Toy houses: a socio-anthropological approach to analysing objects

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the toy house as an object away from its usual context, using a socio-anthropological approach. In an earlier publication (2003), Brougère analysed the social dimension of the toy where it was viewed as part of a socially built system of networks involving many actors (manufacturers, parents, children and others) and many processes (manufacturing, distributing, advertising, buying, giving presents, using, playing, destroying). However, this interdependent system must be considered first through the objects that form the nodes of this network as only by examining its material culture can we can better understand the way it functions.

KEY WORDS

children's play • construction set • design • material culture • playthings

The socio-anthropological approach to analysing objects views them away from their usual context, which involves isolating the toy house from the way it is used as well as from the way it is involved in a cultural exchange system or any kind of behaviour or practice. By taking this approach, I hope to discover important information about what constitutes the toy house, and perhaps even more about the system of action and uses to which it belongs. For the moment, we will put to one side any thoughts that the actors involved (e.g. manufacturers, parents and children) may have about the toy house and first of all try to interpret its superficial attributes. This does not imply reducing the uses of the toy house to texts, where all that would be required is the ability to read. The network of actions and uses leaves traces in the sense that it is what enables the use of the object and creates alliances between the actors. For the network to function effectively it must necessarily be inscribed onto the object itself (Becker, 1986).

The toy is an object that seems to have something to say; it has always been an ally in my search for meaning. Instead of projecting onto the toy all

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the conflicting values that a society can express, I engaged with its own meanings very carefully.[1] I wanted to see what might be hidden under its skin. However, I never judge it, reject or compare it with what it should be. I accept it as it is so that it can reveal its own significance rather strongly and loudly. Since the ultimate destiny of a toy house is to be used by a child, it should be easy to read. We are not interested in tracking down hidden worlds or obscure truths, but simply what is written on the very surface of the toy, something the children themselves can read, even if they interpret it in another framework, that of play. We simply want to reveal what its appearance tells us. What does a toy look like? Everything and anything. In contrast to objects that have a standardized shape, the toy can assume a great variety of shapes, colours and aspects. Is it not true that anything can be a toy? Is it not true that the toy has the ability, like some pictorial painting, to represent everything – in the real world, as well as the imaginary world – including the great variety of human beings, animals and inanimate objects? This is the case even though not everything is represented or representable at a given moment. Defining the range of what can be made into a toy is certainly a difficult task. The toy's diversity carries it through, a diversity that is endlessly increased by new toys, which fill Christmas shop windows each year: new imaginary worlds, new technologies made into toys (such as the mobile phone), and new models of cars that find themselves side by side with models that seem to have lasted for generations. If certain representations disappear, it is often without any fanfare. However, new toys are sometimes less discreet. For example, Harry Potter is on display practically everywhere with much publicity, causing a media frenzy and invading stores.

Trying to make this entire multi-coloured population of toys speak with one voice – where the common thread, if it exists, could not possibly exist even from the start – does not seem to be the best way of finding a toy's significance. We must search through this multi-coloured state, through the diversity, where we will no doubt find some categories or groups with common features. How does the toy reflect objects in the real world? This article considers the house, the habitat, as a means of entering into the discourse of the toy. What does the house become when it is transformed into a toy?

REPRESENTATIONS OF HABITAT

Browsing through toy shops reveals an amazing number of representations for the habitat of the toy house. In most cases, habitat is represented by the house in its strictest sense: the dominant image is the traditional detached, one-family house, complete with its trademark pitched (or gable) roof. There are certainly other less conventional representations but the toy house does not seem to adapt readily to architecturally modern representations, not even representations from the 1930s, which might already seem quite old architecturally. This is not the case for other toys, such as the miniature model car, for example, which has managed to stay up to date, mainly by

being represented by new makes of cars. The toy house tends to refer more to the myth of the house than to new constructions. However, this mode of reference is not so different from the miniature car if we accept that, for the car, the myth implies constantly redesigning current models. The cultural value is specific to each representation; the house would appear to reveal its essence through tradition, the car through change.

The toy house has a tendency to take over what roots it in permanence, in time immemorial. At first glance, the toy house does not seem to reproduce contemporary houses but rather an idea of what a house is; an archetype. It would nevertheless be wrong to pretend that the toy house is a simple realization of representation. It is certainly attempting to faithfully refer to a reality of the world that is external to the toy – the habitat in this case, in its representation of single dwellings – but this representation is only one element of the toy. It is not a picture but an object that can be inserted in practices that we call 'play'. Therefore the representation of the house must follow a greater principle and this is linked to its role in how the child plays with it. The house can have a simple shape that seems familiar, the child's ordinary environment. This is often the case with developmental toys, or the real resources of play, the things that the user is supposed to play with, as is the shape which structures pretend play. Both dimensions can, of course, be superimposed on the same object.

Depending on the toy in question, the same representation may take on different roles. A toy may be nothing more than the presentation of an image, but with a different function: the stickers from a lotto game or educational dominoes, or perhaps a rug in the shape of a house. The function of the toy would not change at all if the images were completely different. This is only an example but it is still significant since it might be the reason for choosing one toy over another, except for purely functional material (e.g. number lotto, or an activity centre with simple buttons). If non-representative realizations exist, they are in the minority of what is available. They are crushed under the many multiple images, among them our toy houses, which, albeit far behind toy animals, are fetish objects if there are any within the universe of the toy. However, representation can interfere with function, which is one of the conditional elements for its prescribed use. This is the case with the doll's house: how it is used is in direct relation to what it represents. The doll's house is played with, or the doll is played with inside the house. For this type of play, there has to be an object that represents (more or less roughly or precisely) a house. The function and representation cannot be isolated from each other.

In addition to these two main representations in a toy (image and function), we find others that are more unexpected. One of these shows the effect of reality; neither a simple representation, nor the central function of the toy, but rather a means of rooting a reference in the real world. This is achieved through the use of decor with, for example, real houses represented beside the track in train sets, or an image of the real world provided in space

games. As part of the decor, the house beside the train track is not what gives the train set its function (i.e. the train or its characters), yet it is more than a simple decoration. The house imposes itself so that its reference to reality is made credible.

> In the world there are houses,
> my toy reproduces the world or one possible world,
> therefore there must be some houses.

This syllogism is implicit in this category. It reflects a desire for realism, more so than in the two previous cases of image and function.

As a fourth possibility, we find representations of the house hidden behind the framework of building or construction toys, where representation is directly dependent on the shapes of the individual pieces. This in turn can lead to a compromise between realism and the constraints associated with the principle of construction. The result depends on the interpretation that the builder (the player, typically the child) makes of the model, opening a pathway towards representations that can diverge widely from the referent underlying the model.

The toy is an incredible machine for building descriptions. There are different representational modes that will use realism, to a greater or lesser degree, and may require compromise in terms of the other demands of the toy. A toy cannot be reduced to a mirror that simply reflects what it sees. This primary role of function could lead us to sideline representations because it is so important that toys can be played with, regardless of whether or not the houses are crooked, have walls, roofs or floors. Accepting toy houses as a realistic representation of the world would lead towards a vision that is far removed from their actual image since they never hide the things that separate them from an accurate model. For example, a building made out of Lego does not hide the various colours of the bricks that allowed it to be built; it displays them. Each of these four representational modes opens and closes the possibilities for representation. They imply functional constraints, transformations or choices; we could even call them makeshift repairs.

Therefore we cannot analyse habitat in a toy in a general way: we must take into account the way in which it inserts itself in the universe of the target game. All of this is inscribed on the toy, since it is meant to be understood by the buyer or the user (or in the best of cases, by both). In the toy's world, therefore, the house is submitted to the functions of the toy and not the reverse. It has to keep a low profile. The house cannot have an imposing presence since it is simply the means to something else; thus it is pointless to judge these toys by the rules of some untraceable lesson in architecture given to children. In order to reveal the truth, I next examine a few toys to see what they reveal.

TOY HOUSES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Toy houses designed for toddlers are mostly chosen by adults and given to a child who has not yet completely understood the distinction between a toy and an object. In the first few months of having a toy, the child uses primarily the functional dimension of the toy: for exercise games, explorations and developmental manipulations. It is only progressively that the toy house takes on a symbolic dimension for the child. The images projected by this toy are primarily aimed at adults, the parents who will see these representations as harmonious with their own image of their child.

As a result, what is dominant in this type of toy house is a symbolism of the house as an element of the universe that is linked to childhood. This is represented by the traditional house with a pitched roof. It is actually more a symbolic reference than a proper representation, carrying various developmental functions without necessarily having any direct link to the image of the house (a box of shapes, a activity centre). In this way, the house calls on an image of security, proximity, the child's referential universe intended for the parents. It is a reference point, a grounding point that is meant to tie in with representations of childhood. Here we find the idea, developed elsewhere (Brougère, 2003), that the toy is also a way of setting the stage of the image of the child who will play with it.

As a consequence of the double logic at work in the toy, a logic which can be ludic or functional and social, it is important to offer the child the possibility of acting and to display the image of the child's surroundings – or at least the clichés associated with it. For example, the chimney might be more important than the house for which it expresses all its value. This type of toy house functions, then, at two levels: as a resource for a child's manipulations, and also as a realization of the child's feelings or their material translation by the adults. In this context, habitat holds a place of choice in comparison to other representations. The image of the house is used to convince the buyer that the toy is appropriate for the child. It is a sign of recognition, mediating values of security, comfort, intimacy and family unity. Using such an object favours such values.

THE PLAYSET – A UNIVERSE OF ITS OWN

In this domain, reference to an external reality combines with play: the house is a resource for activities directly associated with its image. The playset represents a building, either a realistic house or a completely imaginary one, and the ludic activity is part of this structure. The house is a realization. It is a prop for the elements of play, in the image of a toy house, which is the archetype of this category. Play takes place in and around the building through various characters and accessories. The playset becomes a closed and self-sufficient universe, a place for the unfolding of play.

This universe must respond to the functional demands of manipulating the furniture, the vehicles and the toy figures or dolls. However the

Figure 1 Barbie's house (Mattel).

symbolic demands are ever present. The house expresses a specific universe; it can be vegetal (trees) or animal. The shape or image is in relation to a realistic global image and its source comes from something imaginary created for the occasion or it pre-exists through other fictions, for example, books or cartoons. The building often has great importance in the symbolic organization (the theme) and in associated play activity: the farm with its accessories orients play in a specific direction even if the child can choose to play with it completely differently. It organizes the playing space and it is the catalyst to a play narrative.

Whether the referent is realistic or imaginary, the symbolic dimension is essential. Beyond reality, there is a theme, an atmosphere, that must be transmitted (the archetypal farm, the castle or fort, and the Barbie house (see Figure 1) are three quite different examples). Symbolism and function strengthen each other. The images are chosen for their richness in stimulating play and not for their similarity to reality.

Here, imaginary worlds are greatly enriched with new freedoms, new combinations, as we see in successful doll's house universes like Hasbro's My Little Pony, both human and 'horse' through combination and translation. Play seems to be a symbolic implementation of the myth or dream. The goal is not to be true to what is real, but to a desire, a fantasy, to a world that is simultaneously identical to ours (visible reference points) and totally different (see the analysis by Seiter, 1993). Through their constructed environment, the little animals that are manipulated by children in play become part of the human universe (school, shops, cottage, etc.). These constructions seem to humanize the universes, which validates the comparison with humans.

The functional dimension does not show up at another level. It reinforces the image by allowing the action to come from the building. By means of its function in play, the building justifies its presence. The child, through manipulations which integrate the house in a coherent universe, gives it meaning and transforms it into something other than a decorative element.

Finally, in this type of toy house, the building is a closed entity, a universe in itself filled with the elements that have just enclosed it: the furniture of the doll house, for example. Here a fantastically faithful and detailed reproduction is the archetype. What remains to be seen is how the representation is built; a simple outline is often enough to capture this universe. The roof, whether a rough draft or accurately represented, appears in the form of the traditional pitched roof, red as though made with tiles, and this is enough to bring to mind the house as a closed space even when actually playing with it prevents it from being closed. The roof is a symbolic closure: one room with a roof, even without walls, represents a house. In an even more rudimentary way, a simple wall topped with an open roof offers a contrast between inside and outside, and a definition of a closed space as opposed to an open space.

Some toys represent only what gives life to the characters and accessories in the interior universe of the house. Only a few features are necessary to set the scene. The toy house is like the theatre, where the scene can be captured with minimal clues. The furniture and various accessories take on a great deal of importance in authenticating the action. For example, a toy-sized escalator that really works is enough to make one think of a large department store; the rest is a question of accessories and play.

Other codes can overload the habitat's codes *stricto sensu*: the toy is in fact an object that is charged with diverse meanings and functions. Here, a pink farm with stylized animals relates to the soft and tender universe of a young child, where the doll's house is transformed according to the theme (safari camp, tropical bungalow with accessories). It is coloured according to the inherent theme. In addition, the frame of the house is not autonomous but filled with the referential universe translated through the toy in its own way.

Another relevant example, this time with a touch of animism, is the farm for toddlers where the traditional silo is topped with a Mickey Mouse head. The character shapes the architecture which has become somewhat alive; this character then expresses the essence and the identity of the toy. We find the same logic underlying Skeletor's base in the Masters of the Universe series. The only things changed here are the referents: an asteroid in the shape of a skull. Once opened, we find the headquarters of the hero. The dwelling becomes a character, a hero among heroes. The same principle led to the famous 'Castle Grayskull', a cross between a fantasy castle and a skull shape. This logic is particularly noticeable in trendy toys that owe their success to an image, an identity, an easily referenced atmosphere, or typically the focus of large advertising campaigns.

Anything can become a house or be interpreted as the home of some more or less fantastic being: a chimney, a bus, a teapot, a turtle shell or a snail shell. The house can be projected in any shape that is able to accept it. It is signified by the presence of windows and a door, which are enough to transform anything into a house. However, there is also the fantasy of size

reduction, the possibility of sheltering inside objects or entering them to discover what is hidden inside.

These universe houses create a miniaturization that is both functional and symbolic. They let children adopt the role of Gulliver amongst the Lilliputians. We could just take a functional approach to the miniaturization of the toy: children are smaller than adults and the toys must be made to their size. However, miniaturizing adds values other than simply fitting the toy to the size of the child. Miniaturization is what gives the child the ability to master the world – a symbolic mastery, of course, but no doubt important from the viewpoint of the child's experience of the world. Bachelard (1957) showed the extent to which miniature models continue to encourage dreams that remind adults of their childhood. In this way, playing with these toys encourages children to project themselves into the miniature universes to be found in many stories (e.g. *Alice in Wonderland*), films or cartoons, which can be used as a narrative or as a point of departure for playing.

The success of different toys such as Polly Pocket (see Figure 2), which is on an even smaller scale, has radicalized miniaturization, in addition to modernizing production techniques. With this toy, children can have the world in their pockets, an imaginary world in which it might be difficult to see how this could give the feeling of mastering the real world. Yet, the child need only pretend to master the world. As is always the case with toys, the present benefit is more important than preparation for the future. The house becomes a complex universe and at the same time it fits into a pocket.

Figure 2
Polly Pocket (Mattel).

In contrast to other rare cases, function is the dominant feature of some toy houses. When this happens, the house is reduced to its simplest expression: it is nothing more than a box that displays its interior when opened. The representation of the house may disappear to be replaced by the interior which has become essential for play. These universe-type houses respond to the same play functions with respect to disposition, organization and projection into a reduced universe, which vary depending on the theme and explicitness of the functional dimension. With the exception of garages and a few warrior or fantastic universes which do not have much of an interior, the examples we find are stereotypically feminine or, at least, they are presented with that bias. This reinforces the

Figure 3
Victorian doll's house (Playmobil).

traditional opposition between play geared towards the interior and family space, and play geared more towards exterior themes, movement and adventure. This idea is explored in discussion of the next category.

Playmobil made a positive decision in creating a more 'girl-oriented' universe, using pink rather than blue to market its doll's house and giving a home to its famous pliable toy figures. Moulded from plastic, Playmobil's archetypal Victorian doll's house (see Figure 3) offers the child a Victorian universe exemplified by the house, furniture, the dolls themselves, cars and other external accessories. In contrast to all the thematic variations, we find that this archetype is almost an exact replica. The toy's logic is dependent on the play's historic universe but is partially independent of the modern external world. What gives value to this type of toy house universe is how true it is to the logic of the toy and how the child plays with it rather than to the surrounding adult universe. The toy has a closer relationship to the play world than to the external world.

MINI WORLDS: FORTS, CASTLES AND TRAIN SETS

As a building in a mini-world, the toy house is no longer closed in on itself. Instead the house or building is an element of something larger; play is not just focused on the house but on a cluster of buildings representing a particular universe – or at least a part of it. Mini-worlds offer numerous referents since this is where historical and imaginary worlds intertwine. For example, a town or city can be represented and constructed; in this case, urbanism is being played with through a reconstruction of the world using basic elements. Even in this example, function and representation are closely allied. The car, and more generally the vehicle, is one of the functional elements of this type of play. It is a universe built for evolving.

However, it needs to be stressed that there is a natural progression from playsets to mini-worlds. There is no great discrepancy between them and some components overlap. However, with the mini-world, there is no longer a closed space that folds in upon itself; here there is an open space, like that of the city, which can be infinitely developed with the use of new accessories.

In addition to the creation of an imaginary world, the fantasy of a true reproduction of the world can exist in its entirety, a reproduction that we find, for example, in model trains. The world is reconstructed around the train (again a vehicle that structures the universe of play). This is done by offering a double fantasy, which in turn offers a greater sense of reality or credibility. With great attention to detail and to the representation of imperfection and incompleteness (houses under construction), we find ourselves very close to certain visions of hyper-realism. The presence of detail validates the realization of the dream. In this framework, we find the delusion of mastering the world through its miniature reproduction. Philip K. Dick (1999) makes reference to this in his novel *Small Town*.

Responding to real demand or desire that seems to be coming from older children (or even adults for whom miniature reproduction has become a hobby rather than a way of playing), mini-worlds are developed which liberally interpret reality by referring to more than they represent. The buildings are painted in vibrant colours, shapes are simplified and stylized. This is more about creating a caricature of the house than its representation: it is more like a reference point for play or for stimulating the imagination. These environments also apply to vehicles that follow the same principles of transformation. However, the scale is different and the user is obviously much younger.

Regardless of their authenticity, toy models are more likely to be based on traditional houses in ancient or historical urban centres with a mode of reference that is 'fixed in time'. The architecture of the 20th century, its buildings and suburbs, are rarely represented. The universe of the wooden toy train is a paradox in this sense as it sometimes includes accessories reflecting modern architecture. A few painted wooden cubes with sketched-in windows are enough to represent buildings or even skyscrapers. Here, play is very often carried out, at least at first, as an organizing entity, setting the scene as it were. In contrast to the way in which characters or dolls are moved around in a toy house, play is organized, structured and put in place before any trains and vehicles can be moved. The constructed space is inspected and regulated by manipulating various accessories.

PLAYING WITH IMAGES – THE HOUSE IN JIGSAW PUZZLES AND BOARD GAMES

With jigsaw puzzles, educational games and board games, the image of house and habitat can be used as an illustration, or even as a decoration, but also a resource for learning.

The house and the city form part of the universe into which adults like to initiate children. For instance, with jigsaw puzzles or blocks designed for the very young, images of houses and habitats are constructed without being manipulated in a game. Once again, the house is usually a traditional house. It is almost as though it were more important to reinforce traditional images above all else. In the simplest games, this conventional image illustrates the word 'house', or all learning related to this reality. However, houses are rare in this category: architecture, the discovery of the constructed universe, is chosen less often than nature as an educational object for educational games. This domain does not seem to be used for teaching purposes, at least not through games. Very few board games take on the universe of construction. Monopoly (Hasbro) is more concerned with the value and profits of real estate and buildings; the game remains abstract in its reference to the constructed universe and the houses used are more like pawns (that keep the traditional image of the little house with the pitched roof) than urban houses.

Jigsaw puzzles created for adults tend to mostly use habitat in their various illustrations. Here, more than elsewhere, traditional clichés predominate (old house, farmhouse, cottage, chalet) with preserved old monuments, villages and environments (on the edge of a lake, the sea or in the mountains). Contemporary architecture is only marginally present; we may find New York of course, and some recently famous buildings. Having become a potential decorative object in a jigsaw puzzle, architecture seems to have been consigned to a higher level of preferred taste, especially when the referent is the habitat. The cardboard model seems to be nothing more than a collage of architectural heritage, typically monuments. It's about recreating not creating.

This domain, free of all fantasy linked to the logic of play or imagination, is dominated by traditional images. Freed from the constraints of games, architectural representation does not seem to be original nor is it oriented toward a real discovery of the contemporary world. However, there is one exception – the board game Hotel (MB), in which 3D buildings are set up and put into play. This game presents contemporary shapes of recreational architecture to illustrate its theme and name. This is strongly symbolic and follows strict rules, thereby making it more easily suited to the universe of the toy.

CONSTRUCTION TOYS

Toy houses related to the function of constructing are completely different from the categories examined so far. It is certainly possible to use the elements of construction to build something other than a building, a vehicle or a machine, for example. Habitat is only one aspect of the building function and probably not the most common, especially in games designed for older children. Themes of vehicles and their technical domains seem to be the most common in these toys.

Reference to building a house can be found in construction pieces, either through the shape of a roof (the universal 'symbol' being the pitched roof) or through elements of the habitat (windows, most often doors, or a specific shape of a specific habitat: castle, space station, etc.). Here again, we find the same degree of variety from a realistic element to a discrete allusion to the universe of the house. Further, we might wonder whether certain basic pieces could be compared to structural components like, for example, the plastic brick.

Some models of construction toys refer explicitly to habitat. In addition to these, there is the box theme. Although the box is far from offering multi-purpose material, as a theme it supposes the selection of the necessary pieces for constructing a precise model: these are the same pieces referred to in the category of the mini-world. Building blocks are simply a means of accessing, by self construction, the toys and figurines of the same type found in the mini-world, regardless of whether they are realistic universes (the airport, the city) or imaginary (Lego's Fabuland or space). For younger children, the shapes are simplified (Duplo or Clipo): it is about suggestion rather than representation.

Construction toys open up a wide range of possibilities by using various combinations to represent the surrounding world or to create imaginary universes which can be enriched. Expansion makes it possible to have greater variety, to take into account various architectures: buildings, the architecture of the future with space themes and a variety of basic shapes depending on the manufacturer.

Even before the child begins the task of construction, the materials are presented with a theme, a representation and some images. This type of play rarely escapes a degree of predetermination. Construction toys are not limited to the functional domain; they are part of a symbolic dimension that is present before any action is taken by the child.

The functional constraints are very important. They crop up again and again in this type of construction which is obtained *in fine*. They are defined by the very shape of the pieces and the way in which they are put together. Here again, function and representation strongly interact with each other. The final result will always bear the mark of the technical principles that enabled the toy construction to be built and the constituent parts are easily identified. Contrary to the model, the process of construction is not erased; the action of constructing is reflected in the final result.

However, as the construction moves closer to producing a model, it becomes the goal of the activity and not simply the means. This replicates the actions of playing and constructing, which are also found in the adult world.

The pieces of the construction set facilitate the building process of a reproduction of a unique model without imposing too many rules. The result obtained in this case is outside the scope of my analysis since it results from the child's action and not directly from the object itself, especially since

its construction is dynamic and limited to the kind of play that it will generate.

What is often more important than the general effect of the ensemble is the supporting detail of the game or the reference made to the referential universe. Children will play with building toys following the same conceptual principles of the toys that are available to them: action and reference have more importance than the authenticity of the representation.

Building toys seem to have a particular status with respect to the possibility of construction; this is even before a model becomes a representation or a resource of imaginary play. However, construction suggests a specific recreational interest which should not be confused with learning the processes of construction used in the outside world. There could be a game called *Piccolo Architecto* whose rules of play may have nothing to do with real construction. A pretence certainly, but it responds to the logic of play. Reference to real building is formed on the basis of distanciation and multiple translations. Construction toys give children opportunities for constructing their own instruments of play, realizing their own fantasies, symbolizing the real world according to their needs at any given moment. They are not really a means of accessing the building process of the adult world.

Consequently, construction toys offer possibilities of fantastic architecture in the sense that the constraints of play (for example, ease of construction) and attractive symbolic themes take precedence over any desire to make the constructed universe understandable. These toys can be manipulated to achieve a desired architecture, for playing games or indulging fantasies, but must first obey their own developmental rules. This is why Lego illustrates its boxes with specific themes: for example, the 'pirate' theme Lego (Figure 4) can be used to develop an imaginary architecture, which must first be true to the imaginary pirate ship, desert or tropical island.

Figure 4
Pirate's house (Lego/Playmobil).

CHILD-SIZE HOUSES

Toy houses that are large enough for a child to go inside are also a type of image resource. They can be made from building blocks but, regardless of how they are made, they are oriented towards other functions. With this type of toy house, children play a role, not through the intermediary of toy figures, but through their own body and body movements. This forms a new combination of a functional and symbolic aspect, another universe of constraint.

This toy house is a symbolic place that can be entered and that can offer shelter. In order to have a mimetic action, a partial reference to the house is usually enough: a roof or a wall. The child's imagination and activity complement the representation dynamically. Just as for smaller-sized toys, this is a domain of fictional investment: tents, in particular, illustrate a variety of themes, for example, characters from animated films or cartoons. Other functions can be superimposed onto these habitats, thereby modifying the representation: the house can also be a desk or a slide. The result is a compromise between the house's function and its theme: a window might suffice for creating a shelter theme, an elementary habitat.

Finally, the materials (wood, various plastics, soft fabrics, etc.) used for this type of house are more diverse than for the others, whatever the representation. If one tent can, perhaps even logically, represent a tepee, another tent would be fine for an igloo or a log house. What dominates in all these representations is the traditional house (except for the teepee and the igloo) with its pitched roof or, even better, the rustic cabin that has a look of 'poverty' or simplicity making it more inviting as a shelter. This is so strong that simply suggesting a sloped roof is enough to create a cabin.

If each category of toy is considered in its own system, a quick overview will reveal a deep unity in the use of habitat referent. As a logical pair, image and function are constantly at work. The toy is not only an instrument of action; it is also an instrument of dreams, of desire, of fantasy. We could say that it socializes child-like desires and dreams – it gives them their social and cultural shape. The predominance of this logical pair would indicate that there is little room for an educational or informative discourse concerning the house and architecture. One exception to this is the domain of educational games, but do they still fall within the universe of play?

The toy is compliant in creating representation and providing the clues from which players develop their games. To help in this process, the toy offers archetypal representations, clichés and stereotypes. These features speak to everyone; being first and foremost resources for meaning before being representations of any reality. The toy house creates an atmosphere and functions like a pivotal point from which the child can begin to build.

However, the toy is not limited to these stereotypes. Recreational functions and free rein of the imagination pave the way for original creations without any direct relationship to the daily environment: for example,

houses for humanized animals, day-to-day objects offering refuge and a hero's personality penetrating the shapes of its toys or its habitat. Many traditional processes of the imagination produce habitats for play which do not reflect our homes but today's non-functional architectures. This includes not only toys derived from animated films or cartoons, but also those that are constructed in entertainment parks and playgrounds, following the same logic as that of the toy.

Rather than offering an image of our world, the toy presents an image of our myths, of our way of constructing childhood. Habitat, like everything else, is not present in the toy based on what it is, but through the mediation of images that structure our different representations of the child. Habitat is understood as the adult's representation of the child but also the child's representation of the exterior world, seen in a more or less mythical way by the inventors.

In addition to being a stimulant to activity, the toy has to give the child a universe that is interesting or seductive. It suggests a compromise between the real (and its unavoidable reference points) and the illusion which is essential to play. The toy is a materialized illusion.

From this follows an architecture that only has meaning inside the toy, inside the universe of play thus defined. The toy does not represent the habitat, it creates an artificial world. This artificial world is built by adapting to the constraints of play and to its fictions. It can also produce references that are explicit to the real world. They function above all as signs or suggestions, giving the idea of a house and referring to the idea of a house or building, rather than to outside reality in all its complexity.

BEYOND THE HOUSE: FUNCTION OR REPRESENTATION

So far, we have only discussed houses that exist in the form of toys. Far from being a reproduction of the outside world, they create an original world with its own logic. In fact, the toy tells us more about itself than about reality. It shows us what it is and has no pretence of addressing any truth or knowledge about the world. There is therefore no point in trying to use the toy as an objective means of accessing reality. Instead, we will try to gain a basic understanding of the logic of this object of play.

Recreational function is what moderates the desire for an educated relationship with the world. The relationship of the toy to reality is shaped by the need to include a potential for play. This translation from the real world to play is not necessarily a betrayal; it is more like a transformation.

We must not forget that the goal of the toy is to be used in play. This has lead certain authors to define it essentially by its functions, but there are as many functions for the toy as there are possibilities for playing with it. This functional vision is largely relayed through the discourse of psychologists, some of whom see toys as 'tools of childhood' (Michelet, 1972). They

define them by the use that will be made of them and even by the potential that they have to develop certain of the child's abilities.[2]

This vision leads to a double presupposition: on the one hand, the meaning of the toy is determined by its use in play and, on the other hand, this use is analysed from the categories of the child's development. I have gone from bad to worse. In challenging a definition of the toy as a mirror of the world, I have found a new one that sees the toy as a tool of play, disregarding its relationship to the represented world.

But does reference to merely the notion of play help us to understand the toy? This would appear to be an even more difficult question since playing seems to escape any assignable function except for entertainment, and this is what has, traditionally, limited it to concepts of gratuitous or even futile behaviours (Brougère, 1995). What characterizes play is that it can create the objects it needs or adapt others from their conventional uses – for example, make a fire from any kind of wood, or use anything for play without needing specifically manufactured 'tools'. As an open activity, play is not a directly determinable activity.

What does it mean to play with a toy figure, a miniature car or a house? There are certainly some activities that are more probable than others, but there is no precise definition for use except that there is a relationship with the fact that the toy is a car, a house or a human figure, whatever the image implies. This leads us back from the play function to representation. The toy house takes us on a roller-coaster and has us spinning in circles.

We simply cannot avoid the representative dimension, which is close to, or even as significant as, the functional dimension of the toy. As an instrument of play, the toy becomes a resource for expressing the world. It represents real or imaginary elements without being tied to a system of game rules or to a narrow playing function. This is what enables us to distinguish between what is usually called a toy and what is called a game. This distinction is clearly present in standard vocabulary used spontaneously by both children and adults and it is also found in catalogues and toy shops. What is called a game (board game, electronic game or video game) implies the presence of a determining function for the legitimate use of the object: for example, the rules for a board game, or the instructions for a construction set. Even if an image is essential for these objects (the theme of the board game or the shape of the building pieces), and would seem to be increasingly the case, the function justifies the object through its existence as a resource of a potential game. Therefore, board games are not pure expressions of recreational principles. They increasingly integrate – and Monopoly is a good example of this – the representation of an aspect of current or past social life (unless they are referring to some imaginary universe). They associate image and function as the game of chess has done for centuries; but, with chess, the image is erased by the structure of the game and although each piece has a specific character delineated by its very shape, the player can forget the underlying ancestral symbols. What is left is a

symbolic force that can be revived in certain situations (Dextreit and Engel, 1981).

Nevertheless, the toy is not defined by a precise function. Above all, we are dealing with a 'bulk' object and children use it freely, without reference to game rules or to any other principle of use. There is certainly another difference: the toy is an object of childhood and is only associated to adults through derision or metaphor. In contrast, an object called a 'game' can be used with respect to a child or an adult: it is not confined to any specific age group, and adult play objects are exclusively games, thereby defining themselves by their play function.

Play activity is multi-dimensional and its practice requires specific instruments (such as *bilboquet*, a cup-and-ball game, having an object which is very much marked by its function) and it also needs the resources of symbolic activity, without determining the way in which they are used. The toy, like the houses we have studied, closely combines a representative dimension with a functional dimension, which sometimes leads to giving the representation to the function or vice versa. An image can in fact have a functional value (to create the existence of play, e.g. the doll's house) or a merely symbolic function (e.g. the silhouette of a given house among other pieces in a box of shapes). The image brings to mind a reality which the child picks up and creates in a game from all the pieces, or a reality that is not determined in detail by a particular toy. A small car calls for something that will make it move, especially when it is a remote control car; however, a teddy bear can have so many different 'legitimate' uses that parents are not able to foresee its role in play (Brougère, 2003).

AFFORDANCE AND IMAGE

The notion of affordance (Gibson, 1979; Krampen, 1995) can throw some light on the matter. It suggests that actions taken by animated beings (human and animal) originate in the shape of the object used. A tree branch of a certain shape, height and load-bearing capacity tempts an observer to sit down on it. Perception is translated into action by making explicit the signs that determine the action. Therefore, a toy, by its shape and the images that it carries, offers a child possible actions suggested by simple perception. The child decodes what the object offers and translates this into action (carrying a doll, petting a bear, pushing a car about, going under the roof of a house). The character of the object, defined by a complex interlacing of functions (possibilities of action, mechanisms and movements) and of representations, produces a perceived meaning, decoded through the action that it triggers rather than in a reflexive way. Through this complex structure, the toy produces a network of meanings for action. This is what gives the toy its special features with respect to other representations that lend themselves to being seen or read but not to promoting action. This is the difference that we find, for example, between a television broadcast and a video game, the

digital form of the toy. Affordance helps us to understand how an image is a resource for action, how separation between function and useful representation does not correspond to the logic of a toy that, by directly associating the two elements, cannot be analysed in terms of pure function or representation.

This peculiarity of a toy is not so different to the features of a game. A game applies a system of rules to an illusion, an action constructing a fiction, for pretend. A toy provides a stimulant of action (the wheels of the car ask for a moving action) at the same time as it provides a symbolic universe that constructs the framework of the illusion (a space vehicle orients the fiction). Game and toy are simultaneously action and image. We find that play, like a toy, is double-sided: one side for activity and the other side for symbolic expression. A toy can therefore appear as a release at the level of acting just as easily as at the level of dreaming. The role of representation in a toy is to create a desire to enter a particular universe, whether the universe is realistic or imaginary. For this, it must be desirable, exciting, or at least evocative.

This explains why a toy does not offer a child double reality, or access to the adult world, but rather a resource for actions or passions of play. At the very least, reality finds itself miniaturized, giving it a kind of magical aura. However, in the last few decades, the toy has retreated further and further from the real world. Images that refer the child to desirable universes (adventure or domestic security, depending on the case) will be preferred over images that only have an informative interest, and consequently they have no immediate play value.

This article has emphasized the importance of this image in play; it must be composed within the constraints of the manipulation of the toy and it must be capable of modification. Representation evoked by the toy must be able to be manipulated and remain functional within play, even though the real (or imaginary) reference may beccome more remote in the process. The logic of the toy is not the same as the logic of the world but that of the play derived from the toy and the child's desires. It should be noted that when the child is younger, the parents' desires with regard to the choices of images take precedence over those of the child, who cannot yet express them. The choice of representations in these two cases will of course be different.

Put in 'functionalist' terms, the expressive function of the object is of prime importance. It annihilates all other functions: the object must have meaning and it must translate a real or imaginary universe that will then become the source of play. Affordance is relevant again here; through its expressive value, the toy stimulates play by opening up possibilities of actions that are coherent with the representation. A baby doll, because it represents a baby, encourages cuddling, dressing, washing, and all the activities surrounding caring for babies. However, there is no parental function in the toy, just a representation that invites this activity on the basis of the meaning (baby) given to the object in a referential social framework. The socio-cultural framework in which the child lives makes this action legitimate and

meaningful, rather than it being a direct function of the toy. The toy acts as a focus of multiple and complex cultural meaning that feeds this meaningful activity – the game.

The toy is a complex object that cannot be defined by a precise function. It facilitates play but there is no precise definition of what it must be. It is stimulating and evocative, associating various images and functions without pre-existing rules. The toy is therefore marked by the domination of the symbolic value on the function, or to be more true to what it is, the symbolic dimension becomes the main function. This prevalence of the image lessens the distance from art and the wide-ranging symbolic wealth of the toy is revealed. However it is functional insofar as this functional dimension is confused with its symbolic value, its meaning as image. The symbolic value is the very function.

The toy can be defined as a cultural object in the sense of transmitting meanings. Therefore, it is cultural media. All objects conceived within a given culture are carriers of meanings, but their function is not to transmit meanings. Cultural objects or media are made up of subgroups of objects that are not only carriers of meaning (e.g. a chair may represent a certain style, values, or a specific history) but that also explicitly transmit meaning (e.g. a book). Within this group, we can isolate artistic objects, whose only function is to transmit meanings. However, artistic objects may be common cultural objects that transmit meanings according to a second goal – the game, entertainment. This is the reason why the toy is such a communicative object. To fulfil its function, a toy must offer certain qualities that will be taken up and interpreted by its potential player. The toy dominates reality in the same way that the toy house assumes a novel transformation specific to the universe of the toy.

OF DESIGNERS

The inventor, often a designer, is responsible for the different elements, the constraints, that enable a product to be marketed and made accessible to its target consumers, and sometimes to others outside this group. The inventor gives the product shape by finding more or less original solutions for linking it to images and functions. Thus the toy acquires real referents (the world as its inventor sees it), cultural data, a representation of play, its potential players and uses. The character of the product will be unique; modifications and compromises will vary according to time and contexts. It is difficult to analyse the shape of the final product because of the different collective and personal elements that go into making each toy. Some choices may have been based on rational decisions or cultural contexts, others may reflect designers' personal conscious or unconscious investments in their own personal utopia, or their interpretation of what suits the child, the parent, the distributor, the marketing agency, etc.[3] Through the inventor's eyes, we find the real or mythical figure of the user, the child whom this inventor is supposed to take into account.

NOTES

1. Like Cochoy (2002), 'we suggest that things should be interviewed with the same degree of seriousness and in the same way as we usually interview people' (p. 37).
2. For a serious functional analysis of games and toys, see Garon (2002).
3. For this question and an analysis of the practices of designers, the reader is referred to Dubuisson and Hennion (1996).

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