Book Reviews

Designing the Creative Child: Playthings and Places in Midcentury America

Amy F. Ogata

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2013. Introduction, images, notes, bibliography, index. 229 pp. $34.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780816679614

In *Designing the Creative Child: Playthings and Places in Midcentury America*, Amy F. Ogata shows how a cultural preoccupation with childhood creativity left its mark on American material life. While the idea of the child as naturally creative first emerged in the eighteenth century and grew steadily during the nineteenth, it was only in the twentieth century that it took root across America. The belief that children were naturally creative, and that their creative sensibilities could be further nurtured and expanded by exposing them to stimulating environments and objects spread rapidly during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, particularly among middle- and upper-class Americans.

Ogata explains that childhood creativity became a subject of pervasive concern because of social tensions related to America's Cold War with the Soviet Union. During that era, many social commentators investigated the effects of child rearing on political culture. For instance, anthropologist Margaret Mead suggested that Soviet children were trained to accept ideology without question, whereas American boys and girls had greater liberty of thought. Mead was not alone, and many experts believed that the key to winning the Cold War was to ensure that the rising generation was flexible, innovative, and open to exploration. The creative child also offered a comforting alternative to sociologist William Whyte's "Organization Man," the embodiment of conformity and conventional living. Child-rearing experts proposed that with proper training and encouragement, youth might develop into something other than the herd-like creatures of David Riesman's "lonely crowd." And, some hoped, creative children, who could find new ways to amuse themselves and who were trained to think independently, might be able to resist the seductive lure of American mass culture that played incessantly on their television screens.

Ogata's book is well researched, well written, and beautifully illustrated—and

truly innovative in its depiction of how a generation of toy designers, architects, and museum curators gave shape to their faith in youthful creativity. Whether it was the flexible, bendable Gumby, the simple and unadorned wooden toys of Playskool, the school designs of Saarinen and other midcentury architects, the playrooms and spaces enshrined in many newly built houses, or the children's art carnivals put on by the Museum of Modern Art, the goal of fostering youthful creativity was embodied in an array of objects, buildings, and installations that still exist today. Often we take for granted these designs, giving scant consideration to their pedagogical and psychological goals, yet undergirding them were larger hopes for the development of an intellectually agile and inventive citizenry. The book also does an excellent job of re-creating the panoply of choices ambitious parents faced as they went shopping for their offspring. Paint-by-number sets and coloring books were to be avoided as crushing creativity; so too were overly realistic toys such as painted trains on tracks, which eliminated the need for imagination. On the other hand, experts recommended finger paints, plain wooden blocks, and toys with vague forms. They suggested that tents and forts for children were likewise acceptable, for they offered the young a private space for imagination and invention. In schools, open classrooms were encouraged, as were buildings that allowed children to see, or better yet, go, outside. Educators regarded movable desks as superior to those rooted to the floor, which they considered overly constraining. In detailing these choices, *Designing the Creative Child* offers a powerful interpretation of what these playthings and play spaces meant to designers, educators, and psychologists, allowing readers to understand the midcentury philosophies that shaped them.

The book might be stronger in its assessment of the effect of these new toys, buildings, and exhibits. To her credit, Ogata admits that children may have used the toys in ways far different from their designers' intentions and that teachers may have employed very traditional pedagogical techniques inside their new, modern, open classrooms. Aside from these disclaimers, however, the book spends little time trying to tease out the experiences of actual users of these objects and buildings and their feelings about them. This is very much a top-down history. Did the children who played with the blocks, studied in the schools, or journeyed on field trips to the museums become more creative than earlier generations—or than their contemporaries who played with toys offering less redeeming value or sat for endless hours in front of the TV? There is probably no way to measure that, of course, but I would welcome some sense of the consequences of these designs. And how did these toys and spaces match children's actual desires? Did youngsters find the plain wooden blocks inspiring—or perhaps boring, when compared to the enticements of frivolous TV programs, paint-by-number kits, and coloring books? While these questions go unanswered, the book nevertheless offers an innovative approach to the history of design, the history of psychology, and the history of material goods, which should appeal to scholars interested in psychology, design, education, child development, and history. That the book makes mean-

ingful contributions to all of these fields is a testament to the insight and creativity of its author.

—Susan J. Matt, *Weber State University, Ogden, UT*

Pretend Play in Childhood: Foundation of Adult Creativity

Sandra W. Russ
Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2013. Images, appendix, references, index. 241 pp. $69.95 cloth. ISBN: 9781433815614

Whether pretend play in childhood is essential for—or even promotes—creativity in adulthood has been long debated. In *Pretend Play in Childhood: Foundation of Adult Creativity*, Sandra Russ has made an ambitious attempt to review the theories and research about pretend play to show its impact on creativity while also noting the controversies and obscurities involved. She begins by defining play and creativity, and she presents a comprehensive description of the scholarship that supports the connections between the two. In later chapters, she addresses the cognitive and affective connections between them and buttresses her view of these connections with data derived from her own research using the Affect in Play Scale, which she designed. She offers suggestions based on training programs to facilitate the connection between play and creativity, describes studies by well-known scientists and famous artists, and concludes with examples from her work in the United States and Italy about the cultural dimension of the differences between play and creativity.

Russ only briefly addresses—primarily to dismiss—critiques of pretense-creativity studies based on what she calls flawed research or too-small samples. Her own research using the Affect in Play Scale provides some of the strongest material in the book. In particular, her analysis of her child-pretense transcripts illuminates the creativity she found in child play. Although she discusses briefly the effects of video games on play and creativity, she does not address the dynamic between technology and the two in any depth.

Russ attempts to connect childhood experiences of play and creativity to later adult creativity in the sciences and the arts. To do so, she relies primarily on descriptions of celebrated scientists and artists, probably because few if any longitudinal case studies linking child and adult creativity exist. For instance, she cites a retrospective study of early, small world-play of MacArthur award recipients. But, primarily, she describes the lives of these talented individuals to support the connection she claims for play and creativity. The attempt may be valiant, but the chapter in which it occurs seems only loosely related to earlier chapters covering the research. She could have strengthened this account with a further discussion of the need for longitudinal research and studies that might clarify whether pretense and creativity co-existed from childhood forward for creative adults. Whether the opportunities for pretense facilitate creativity, or whether individuals are creative throughout life and simply exhibit such creativity differently in childhood (through pretense) and adulthood (through creative works) remains a question for further study.