

# ARCHI-TOY-TONIC

DISCOVERING ARCHITECTURE, DESIGN & CONSTRUCTION THROUGH **PLAY!**

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Dr. Rae St. Clair Bridgman, Professor in the Faculty of Architecture's Department of City Planning, began collecting architectural, building and construction toys in 2014, following her interest in child-friendly cities. The Collection, now amounting to 250 (& counting!) pieces, offers a peek into the world of the child - how they experience, learn about, interact with and ultimately influence the built world around them.

## CALLING ALL BLOCKS!

**BUILDING BLOCKS HAVE LONG BEEN A CLASSROOM AND HOME STAPLE** - from alphabet blocks to entire block cities, they can be found in endless variation all over the world. Blocks are familiar, popular, and, most of all, simple . . . right? In fact, when we take a closer look, there is a surprisingly rich history to be discovered, and it's here that we begin our analysis of the Bridgman Architectural and Building Toys Collection.

Commercial production of blocks began in the mid-19th century, often as a side-gig for carpenters or those in other construction-related fields. Then and now, blocks could be described as having three main functions – as alphabet or picture blocks, as construction blocks, and as a way to pass on cultural heritage, values, and knowledge (Hewitt, 2001).

Friedrich Froebel publishes *Die Menscherziehung* (The Education of Man)

1826

Friedrich Froebel's first Educational Institute opens

1837

The Kindergarten movement takes off in Germany

1840

Froebel's Gifts begin to be manufactured in the US

1869

Anker-Steinbaukasten /Richter's Blocks first appear

1880

Lott's Bricks first appear

1911

Minibrix first appear

1935

LEGO begins producing the first iteration of what will become LEGO bricks

1946

*"The development of the child... answers in miniature to the development of mankind as a whole."*  
– Ellen Key

The first two are pretty self-explanatory, but as for the third, combining though building block history reveals that each new iteration that sprang up carried aesthetic, and sometimes even moral, influences specific to its country and era of origin.

Germany's Richter blocks, first seen in 1880, were made to look like stone and stacked to form castle-like buildings in the fairy-tale, Gothic style common in Germany at that time.

Lott's Bricks, from 1911, were described as producing "good, plain British buildings" (Vale & Vale, 2013).

And LEGO bricks, which now delight minds (and occasionally cause harm to the feet of children and adults everywhere) began with only three colours: red, yellow and blue in emulation of Dutch painter Piet Mondrian.

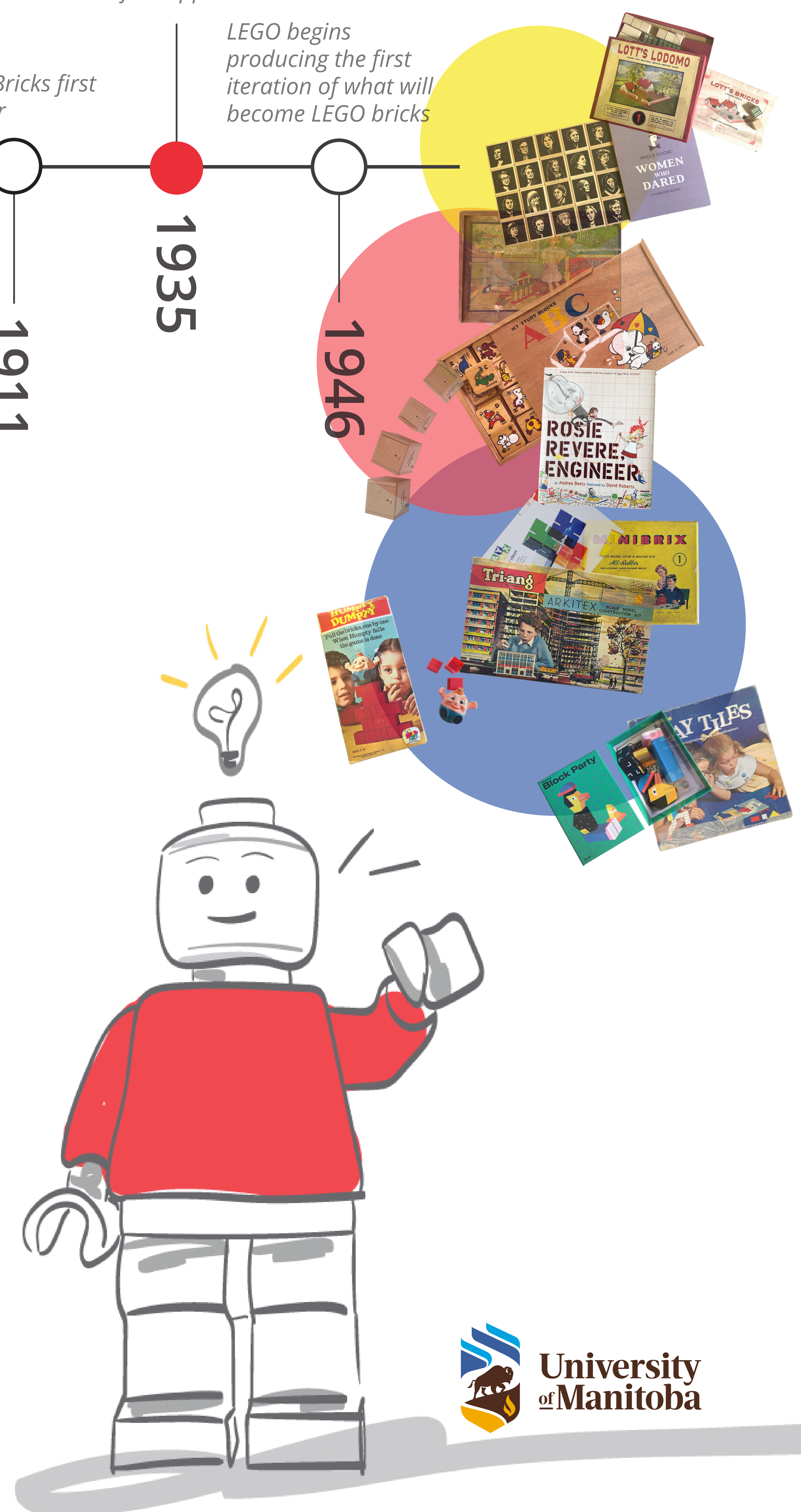
Interestingly, Cold War era education in western countries amped up block-based learning in an effort to encourage STEM subjects for the future democratic, space-race winning workforce (Hewitt, 2001) . . . proving blocks aren't such a simple matter, after all.

Around the same time that these blocks were being popularized, German educator, researcher, and father of the modern kindergarten, Friedrich Froebel, was employing block-based play in his educational institutions. Froebel believed (quite radically, at the time) that all children were inherently creative beings and that this creativity, along with their inner unity with the natural world, needed to be fostered through educational play (Froebel, 1826).

The benefits of hands-on learning and play are now well-documented, and something that most of us continue to gravitate towards throughout our lives; instead of the sandbox, alphabet blocks or Play-Doh sets of days past, we build LEGO sets of increasing complexity, keep mindfulness fidgets at our desks, or simply experience childhood again by insisting that our enthusiasm for a new building set given to a child in our lives is entirely for their benefit.

*We spent the summer organizing, digitizing, and writing about The Bridgman Architectural and Building Toys Collection. Find it all at:*

**ARCHITONIC.COM**



## ***REFERENCES***

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Hewitt, K. (2001). Blocks As a Tool for Learning: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives. *Young Children*, 56(1), 6-13. Retrieved June 8, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42727894>

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