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, combing though building block history reveals that each new iteration that sprung 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:

ARCHITOYTONIC.COM
REFERENCES

