

Building a Mini-Parthenon

Experiences of Users

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1. Introduction: Playing with history

Representations of the past constitute a standard theme in the huge variety of manufactured toys produced and diffused since the eighteenth century.¹ Elements based on various aspects of history have been employed in all sorts of different toys. Tin toy knights made in Fürth, Germany, around 1830 replicated medieval warfare;² an 1895 board game produced in the United States was entitled *Waterloo*, inspired by the famous battle; another board game called *Game of Napoleon* was described in these words: »Latest 1895 novelty, both handsome and instructive. Comprises a series of colored pictures showing events in the life of Napoleon«;³ *Yankee Doodle*, a cardboard game by the same manufacturer was presented in a product catalogue like this: »Handsome and instructive novelty. Similar to the new game *Napoleon*. The spaces upon which the game is played are a series of pictures in colors, illustrating the events in the history of our country. Each player receives counters when they reach a glorious event, otherwise pay counters«.⁴ Many decades later, a *Davy Crockett Outfit* was marketed by Walt Disney around 1955, capitalizing on the lasting popularity of the homonymous American folk hero of the nineteenth century.⁵

Construction sets could not be an exception to the trend of history-based toys and games. Construction sets are toys whose creation has been inspired by the architectural and technological environments; they have been devised and developed by adults on the basis of the opportunities these environments afford for play and for the pleasurable instruction of children. Construction toys, popularised and

1 See Brewer, 1980, for an outline of the development of the modern, commercially manufactured toy.

2 Fraser, 1966, 148.

3 Schroeder, 1971, 99.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Girveau & Charles, 2011, 258.

widely diffused since the second half of the nineteenth century, have been in a continuous dialogue with both the past and architecture. In 1894, for example, a US firm brought to the market a set of building blocks which, »when put together [...] form a beautiful cathedral [...]. It contains a set of blocks beautifully illustrating the story of Noah and the animals entering the ark.«⁶ Whether representing a generic style, such as a bridge or a baroque building, or reproducing specific existing structures, such as the Eiffel Tower, construction toys enable representations of the past and playful approaches to history. On the other hand, in the early decades of the twentieth century, modernist designers had a different attitude as far as history was concerned: they consciously and deliberately promoted play with ahistorical, highly abstract forms. The toy boat *Bauspiel Schiff* of 1923 by Alma Siedhoff-Buscher is a characteristic example.⁷ Nevertheless, despite expressed intentions to break away from the past, historical references were evident even in modernist toys, such as Bruno Taut's *Dandanah* construction blocks made of colourful glass.⁸ One might say that the allure of the past is very powerful, almost inescapable. Nowadays, toys designed following abstract, conceptual design idioms co-exist in the market with historically-inspired playthings, the latter remaining very strong commercially well into the 21st century in the form of castles, knights, pirates and many other types. Such toys and games »stage the past mostly in its alterity as something extraordinary, exciting or worthwhile,«⁹ thus firing the imagination of children (and adults).

In the universe of playthings replicating the past, small size matters: »toys are usually, though not always, miniatures, and [...] these miniatures vary from those which perfectly resemble that which they signify [...] to those which are quite schematic and convey only the salient traits of those objects they signify [...] to those which distort or have little realistic signification whatsoever.«¹⁰ Miniaturisation has an educational as well as psychological role. Small scale enables control by creating »a manageable world«; furthermore, it generates pleasure, as humans »delight in miniaturisation«.¹¹ Philosopher Gaston Bachelard observes that »values become condensed and enriched in miniature«; he writes: »The cleverer I am in miniaturising the world, the better I possess it.«¹² However, with regard to toys, it is worth noting that »being miniatures, [...] they are in *marked contrast* with the everyday world which they represent, or to which they refer, or in which they have their existence. [...] It has even been suggested that the smaller the scale the greater the

6 Schroeder, 1971, 83.

7 Millar Fisher, 2018, 160-161.

8 This highly unusual plaything incorporated references to ancient Oriental and medieval Western cultures, Yagou, 2013, 39-40.

9 Kühberger, 2018.

10 Sutton-Smith, 1986, 248.

11 Schlereth, 1985, 2; see also Walter Benjamin quoted in Zinguer, 2016, 94.

12 Bachelard, 1994, 150.

escape from the restraints of the reality to which it refers.«¹³ In this sense, miniature architecture of the past offers exciting opportunities for imaginative play.

2. Construction sets inspired by Greek antiquity

Construction sets were very popular in the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, when changes in education across various countries of the West reflected the growing significance of children among the educated bourgeois strata whose influence was rising within the social order.¹⁴ In this climate, educational playthings were a logical outcome of parental desire to shape their children in accordance with their own beliefs. Indeed, the study of childhood enables us to see »how adults have remade it to meet changing cultural values«; in this context, »toys function as nodes on a network around which humans argue about cultural values.«¹⁵ Furthermore, »perhaps the most general use for toys in modern society is to teach children in various ways about the control of objects and the roles of people who control those objects.«¹⁶ Playthings may therefore be considered as forms of control, artefacts created to shape the future generations. Adults imparted and sustained specific values by systematically exposing children to certain types of toys. Using historical references in play was totally in line with the general educational character of construction sets, reflecting the cultural priorities and pedagogical mentalities of their times.

Among the numerous, history-inspired construction sets, a certain number has been based on the classical architecture of Greek antiquity, playfully reproducing dominant ideologies and practices. Indeed, in nineteenth century European intellectual communities »flourished an immense fascination for ancient Greece« which was reflected in, among other things, a multitude of Greek revival buildings dotting the European landscape.¹⁷ The impact of classical antiquity on modern Western thought was felt and interpreted in different ways across the European continent. In Britain, for example, the Victorians employed the classical heritage as »a means for achieving self-knowledge and cultural self-confidence within the emerging order of liberal democracy and secularism.«¹⁸ Classical inspiration was also very strong in Germany, »reflecting Germany's fascination with Greek culture since the middle of the eighteenth century«.¹⁹ This fascination, which has been described

13 Sutton-Smith, 1986, 249 (emphasis in the original).

14 Brewer, 1980.

15 Ganaway, 2018, 133.

16 Sutton-Smith, 1979, 13.

17 Turner, 1981, 1.

18 Turner, 1981, xii.

19 Hewitt, 1997, 27.

as an obsession, has had a very deep influence on the development of German culture.²⁰ Germans pursuing Greek ideals such as »self-cultivation, disinterested contemplation of the beautiful, good, and true« had borrowed them »from aristocratic models«; incorporating these ideals into »new research universities, secondary schools, museums, and art academies after 1810, universalised these values and in effect imposed them on generations of middle-class Germans.«²¹ The peculiar German appropriation of classical antiquity affected child rearing in general and, more specifically, the world of construction toys.

A great number of different construction sets had been commercially produced in various countries already since the middle of the nineteenth century. Innumerable variations combining education and play evolved from the original building blocks devised by the German pedagogue Friedrich Froebel.²² Hermann Goldammer, a follower of Froebel, created versions of the highly abstract »gifts« invented by Froebel by introducing cylinders and half-cylinders. These additions enabled Goldammer to propose designs imitating realistic buildings in different architectural styles, including simplified miniatures of antique temples.²³ For several decades, the German manufacturer Anker-Richter was the global leader in the construction toys market.²⁴ Construction sets of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were typically accompanied by instruction leaflets with a range of building proposals, representing various types of historical architecture. The instruction leaflets of Anker-Richter blocks are rich sources of eloquent illustrations of the historical play trend, as the constructions proposed in these leaflets depict numerous architectural styles.

Arguably, »toys that reference a particular structure or period in architectural history are more readily marketable to older children and their parents.«²⁵ The architectural styles offered to children were affected not only by contemporary ideologies, but also by the materials employed and the technologies used to manufacture the building blocks. Inevitably, »the shapes of buildings units themselves direct the type of structure that can be built. A triangular pediment resting on a post-and-lintel wall shouts ›Greek‹; an arch proclaims ›Roman‹; and light frame struts with curtain walls assert ›American skyscraper‹. It would be hard to build a Greek temple with Tinker Toys and impossible to make a Buckminster Fuller geodesic dome out of Anker blocks.«²⁶ Additionally, commercial construction sets representing archi-

²⁰ Butler, 1935.

²¹ Marchand, 2003, xviii-xix.

²² Brosterman, 1997; Zinguer, 2015; Bordes, 2016.

²³ Noschka and Knerr, 1986, 18; Spielgabe 5B nach Goldammer; Brosterman, 1997, 99.

²⁴ Hardy, 2014, 1.

²⁵ Hewitt, 1997, 27.

²⁶ Hewitt, 1997, 26-27.

ture of the past have been made in various colour palettes, ranging from the subtle red, blue and grey hues of Anker Richter blocks, to the bright primary colours of late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. Clearly, colours employed in construction sets reflected dominant marketing trends rather than any concern for historical accuracy. Specifically about ancient Greek temples, although it has been »known since the early nineteenth century that the Greeks used bright colours, the popular image of classical architecture remains monochromatic.«²⁷ This is also the case in related toythings, where a restricted colour palette is taken for granted.

The Parthenon, the Doric-style temple crowning the Acropolis of Athens, is the most exemplary monument of ancient Greek culture; it is considered a symbol of western civilisation and has received multiple interpretations. Described as an international icon and a wonder of the world, it continues to provoke interest and to inspire in many different ways.²⁸ Antiquity-inspired construction sets were created replicating the Parthenon or similarly-looking temples. An obscure example is the *Orion* set (ca 1890), bearing an ancient Greek name and illustration of a Doric temple on the box cover.²⁹ Similar structures could be made with the *Kunst und Spiel* (Art and Play) construction toys, which were created around the turn of the twentieth century and targeted older boys, as they combined play with serious educational purposes. An analyst of these toys commented that »the Acropolis of Athens, which, when really built, is much more beautiful than in the original and not only provides a delightful sight, but also offers children an excellent architecturally beautiful miniature model of this place, which is transfigured by art and history. It is obvious that history lessons are also gratefully supported by such building games.«³⁰ In 1911, Anker-Richter designed the *Graecia* set for making a Parthenon-like Doric temple (Fig. 1), but it is unclear whether it was marketed.³¹ In 1932, the United States branch of the company responded to the demand for such a set by introducing a similar one under the title *Classical set*. A model of the Parthenon made of Anker blocks was exhibited in New York in the early thirties and was widely praised.³²

27 Hewitt, 1997, 27.

28 Beard, 2010.

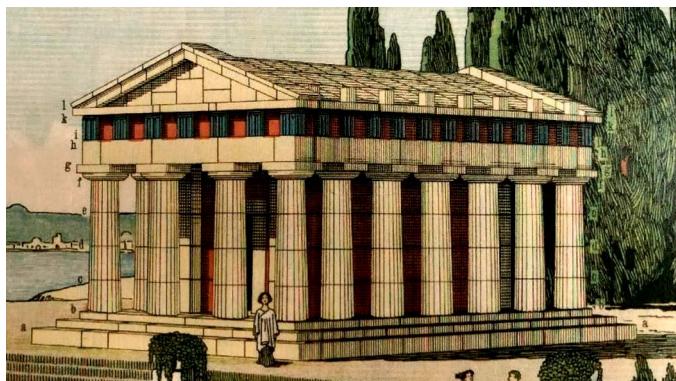
29 Bordes, 2016, 98-99.

30 Hildebrandt, 1904, 10. See also Noschka and Knerr, 1986, 35.

31 Hardy, 2014, 101. The collector George Hardy used the *Graecia* set to build a Greek Temple for the purposes of an exhibition on Architecture and Play that took place at the Katonah Museum of Art (New York) in 1997. – Moonan, 1997.

32 Hardy, 2014, 101-102 and 113-114.

Figure 1: Parthenon-like Doric temple designed by Anker-Richter for the »Graecia set« (1911)



3. Playfully re-building the Parthenon today

Although nowadays the impact of classicism has subsided, manufacturers continue to propose construction sets based on ancient Greek architecture. In recent decades, several different sets for constructing a miniature Parthenon have appeared in the market. In order to collect relevant data, I employed the on-line Amazon platform. I identified several Parthenon-related sets and selected for discussion seven of them (four in plastic, two in paper and one in metal). These were all produced within the last three decades; they remain available for sale. I have used combined data from amazon.com, amazon.co.uk and amazon.de. These websites offer more or less the same products (with some price variations) and access to the same reviews. The responses to these playthings on these on-line marketplaces, mostly by adult consumers, have been used as primary material for examining play practices and associated reflections on historically-inspired construction sets.³³

The *Italeri Parthenon Easy Assembly Kit* is made of plastic on a scale of 1:250 and has received three rather negative reviews. In one of them, a user observes that this can be a credible model of an ancient Greek temple made of hard plastic, but it may not be taken for the Parthenon, as the relative dimensions of the building and the positioning of some pieces are inaccurate. This reviewer exhibits a good knowledge of ancient Greek temples and had high expectations of the toything, which were not fulfilled. The second user, finds the kit too complex, beyond her skill and patience,

³³ Material from these on-line sources was collected between November 2018 and October 2019. As expected, the reviews quoted may not be permanently available from these sites, as a result of product updates or other changes by the vendors.

but would love to see it completed. The third user, offers a damning report for the toy's defects and inconsistencies. She reports: »My son has been putting together Legos for 10+ years and my husband has been building car engines forever – after 3 days of working on it, this had my son in tears and my husband frustrated and enraged.«³⁴ Clearly, this is a case where highly variable user expectations and skills are involved.

The *CubicFun Parthenon 3D Puzzle* is made of plastic and is sold in varying prices in different countries. At the time of research, this item could not be delivered to Germany, unlike other models by the same company such as the Colosseum and the Neuschwanstein Castle. This might suggest that the toy has not been particularly successful. Nevertheless, there is a review by a German-speaking user, who is enthusiastic about the toy, despite the fact that the instructions were only in English: he found the toy easy to make, thanks to the visual instructions, as well as very entertaining. Additionally, there are several English language reviews, some written by mothers, offering a generally positive view. The 3D puzzle is described as »pretty but simple«, »fun build«, »not too complicated«, »excellent toy for children«; also »the kids loved it!« Some of the comments directly link the toy to school projects, for example when it was used as »a visual aid for a 5th grader's presentation on Greek architecture«.³⁵ These comments foreground one of the quintessential characteristics of construction toys, namely the co-existence and perhaps the blurring of entertainment aims with educational ones: fun and duty are both present within the same activity, although it is not easy to judge their relative weight and significance. In addition, the comments emanate from adults, who express their own impressions and judgement, but also speak on behalf of children. The parents' voicing of children's views is problematic from a methodological perspective, as there is no way to prove whether the kids actually »loved it«; we have to rely on the parents' interpretation.

The *Make this Greek Temple* construction kit belongs to the series of cut-out models of historical buildings produced by the firm Usborne. It is a paper model that, according to users, requires a lot of folding, cutting, gluing, and patience. A special feature of the finished model is that the roof opens up and allows a viewing of the interior. The adults who report on it are very satisfied by its quality and detailing; nevertheless, they point out that construction is quite demanding and might be unsuitable for younger kids. One user, who purchased it for a kid's school project, notes: »while there is no denying the final piece looks great, assembling it took many hours and could not be done by a nine-year old alone.«³⁶ Even more than the

34 Review by a mother on 13 December 2018 (see Reviews of product 1).

35 User comments, mostly by parents (see Reviews of product 2).

36 Parent reviewing on »Amazon« from the United Kingdom on 17 June 2019 (see Reviews of product 3).

aforementioned 3D puzzle, the Usborne cut-out model illustrates the co-option of children in activities designed and valued by educators and parents. The previous quotes suggest a level of frustration on behalf of the children involved. However, another parent states:

»Our eight-year old daughter has an ancient Greek project at school and as a result she ended up totally fascinated by Greek mythology and tales. The fact that we visited some of the sites a few years ago might contribute to this. So, rather than books and illustrations, it's great to find a more tangible item that relates to the period.«³⁷

This comment represents the great attraction this toy may have for certain children who are already familiar with antiquity-related buildings and themes. In combination with the previous impressions of the same toy, the last quote also suggests the difficulties in determining generalised, »age-appropriate« labels for such toys.

The construction set entitled *Ancient Greek Monuments to Make: The Parthenon and the Theatre of Dionysos of the Acropolis (Great Architectural Replica)* is also made of paper. Unfortunately, there are no reviews about it, so there is no information whatsoever about users' reactions. It is interesting that this paper model and the previously mentioned Usborne set are classified on the Amazon websites as books rather than as toys, which is a source of confusion.

Among the construction toys that I examined, the *Metal Earth Fascinations Parthenon Construction Toy* is the only one made of metal. It requires no glue, as pieces may be fastened together. Some of the users emphasise that this is not a toy, given its small size, fragility and complexity. They appreciate it, though, from the perspective of the adult hobbyist. One user notes: »A fantastic hobby to get into. This particular model is an absolute must for collectors.«³⁸ This is clearly a specialised view of an adult with the mentality of a collector. Another adult is highly critical and states:

»This is not a model of the Parthenon, regardless of what they call it. The actual Parthenon has 8 [times] 17 columns, this model has 7 [times] 15 columns. The relationship of 8 to 17 was extremely significant to the Greeks, who strove for perfection, as it represents the >golden ratio.< Without this correct proportion, the entire concept of the Parthenon is lost – as it is on this model.«³⁹

37 Parent reviewing on »Amazon« from the United Kingdom on 31 October 2018 (see Reviews of product 3).

38 User Paul Hemsley reviewing on »Amazon« from the United Kingdom on 7 June 2015 (see Reviews of product 4).

39 User F. Smith reviewing on »Amazon« from the United States on 15 November 2014 (see Reviews of product 4).

In this case, the user is very conscious of the history and meaning of the actual ancient monument and does not see the product as a toy at all. In a very different vein, a rather naughty adult user states: »Took me over four hours and breaking some tiny piece (because I didn't read the instruction manual properly), but still managed to finish it off. Looks amazing!«⁴⁰ This is a more spontaneous and hands-on reaction, which inevitably leads to some experimentation by the user. It seems that the deviation from the rules and subsequent improvisation lead to increased satisfaction of the player from the finished item. On the whole, this product has received mixed comments; however, the dominant impression emerging from the reviews is that making this model can be great fun, by overcoming the challenges it presents.

The *Hape Parthenon Sand Mould* is a toy made of bright green plastic and is intended for the use on the beach. It belongs to a set of colourful plastic moulds for creating highly simplified and somewhat funny versions of monuments, including but not limited to the *Leaning Tower of Pisa*, the *Taj Mahal* and a *Mayan Pyramid*. It is easy to imagine that many purists would be appalled by the extreme simplification of these models, which almost reaches the level of caricature or even sacrilege. Nevertheless, the actual users are of a different opinion: there are many reviews of these toys, most of them enthusiastic. A parent notes: »Children at the beach are very drawn to them and my son likes explaining about each structure and where it is located. Wonderful toy!«⁴¹ Another parent states: »My daughter is six and is a huge geography fan and loves learning all about monuments, buildings and architecture in different countries.«⁴² The spontaneity of these comments and the joyful usage they refer to is quite refreshing, as they point to a range of positive learning experiences. Despite the oversimplification and crudeness of this Parthenon model, it seems to be highly successful as it offers knowledge in a very informal as well as pleasurable setting.

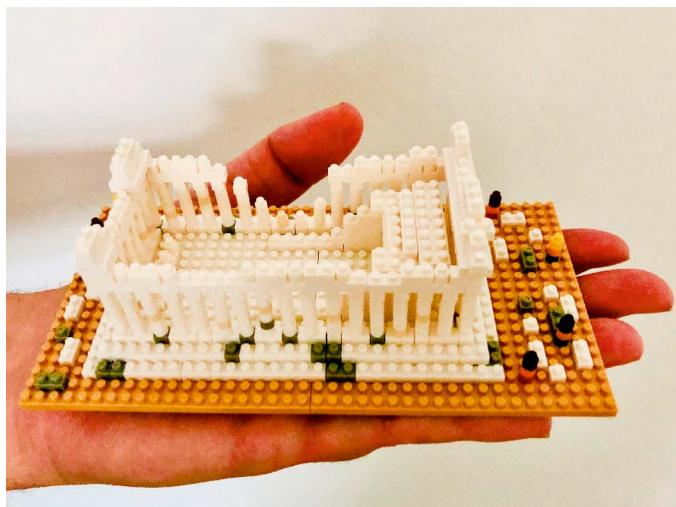
The *Nanoblock Parthenon* plastic set (made in Japan) consists of a large number of tiny pieces (as its name implies) and leads to a very small end-result (Fig. 2). This did not go down well with one of the users, who stated: »Besides being the tiniest product we have ever purchased, the directions are incorrect. The scale is all off. We thought were purchasing legos (or something similar). Wrong. It is a joke. Too tiny and not accurate at all.« Another dissatisfied customer noted: »It came out really weird and was hard to make.« On the other hand, many users liked it a lot. A parent said: »My 9-year-old daughter ordered this and loved the process and result.

⁴⁰ User Sau Fun Chu reviewing on »Amazon« from the United Kingdom on 13 March 2015 (see *Reviews of product 4*).

⁴¹ User with user name »Chesapeake Baybe« reviewing on »Amazon« on 29 March 2016 (see *Reviews of product 5*).

⁴² User from the United States (see *Reviews of product 5*).

Figure 2: The »Nanoblock Parthenon« plastic set



She also learned something about the Parthenon out of curiosity while completing it. A fun pastime!«; another parent: »It is outstanding and my daughter loves it. She can learn monuments.«; and a third one: »It was affordable and challenging to the girl I got it for. But not so challenging that she got frustrated. It engaged her and since she is interested in mythology she enjoyed it even more.«⁴³ So, the general impression from the reviews is a positive one; the challenging nature of the construction is combined with fun as well as with a sense of achievement. Interestingly enough, it appears that girls are more enthusiastic than boys about this toy; perhaps the systematic and patient involvement that this toy requires suits them better. This assumption is underpinned by research into narrative and play indicating that girls are more prone than boys to delight in order and their stories »are more likely to be marked by a stable set of characters located in stable and specified physical settings.«⁴⁴

Overall, the examination of on-line responses to these different toy Parthenons has offered a wealth of insights into the users' perception of the historical past; some of them take the historical aspect of the toy very seriously, while others just view it as an occasion for fun. Similarly, the relationship between expectations and reality varies a lot; there are often diametrically opposed reactions to the same product. The evaluation of responses would require a closer look to the personal

43 Various user reviews (see Reviews of product 6).

44 Psychologist Ageliki Nicolopoulou as cited in Sutton-Smith, 2001, 163.

profiles of users, which is not possible given that there is no access to the relevant data. The on-line responses also reveal play engagement by different generations; they highlight the frequency of cross-generational play, for example involving children and parents or children and grandparents. Last but not least, the on-line data suggest the existence of creative adaptations by users who improvise and modify the construction process to suit their capabilities or mood. These instances show that users do not follow blindly the instructions provided by the manufacturers and respond inventively in order to solve problems. The creativity of producers, who have devised a range of highly marketable toys based on the Parthenon, is matched by that of the players, who generate new possibilities for play. Clearly, as the aforementioned quotes have shown, some of the users are interested in the historical accuracy and validity of the small-scale playful models. On the other hand, there is a large percentage of users who place more importance on the actual use-value of the toy and the enjoyment it brings. Such users might not acknowledge the historical content of the toy; what they value most is the creativity and fun afforded by the product. More generally, users have highly variable approaches to the object, so that the distinctions between simple toy, educational tool, adult hobby and collector's item become blurred. This situation makes straightforward analysis more difficult but, at the same time, illuminates the broad range of uses afforded by historically-inspired toys.

What I found particularly refreshing is the fact that users can freely comment publicly about their experience with the products; I consider it an example of user empowerment. The user feedback is much more direct than in the past, when user testimonials published in promotional material were carefully manipulated and negative user responses were typically ignored or suppressed by manufacturers.⁴⁵ In contemporary on-line platforms, the voluntary posting of both positive and negative comments offers a wealth of insights into the nature of play. Play activities performed in the privacy of the home or at school become exposed (to some extent) in the public realm, enabling us to see more openly the voice of the parent, the child, the adult hobbyist or history lover, and so on. Nevertheless, specifically in the case of child-related feedback, the typical problem of historical research on childhood and play persists; namely that information about how children play and how they feel about it is communicated mostly indirectly, through parents or other adults. Very rarely do we have direct, first-hand reports of children impressions and even when we do, they are often tainted by adult supervision or influence. Thus, the data collected in this way may be quite superficial and even »beautified«; this is a clear limitation of this type of user research. In any case, the variety of responses is very welcome as it illuminates the everyday reality of play. Given this wealth of material available, the topic was enjoyable to research and write up, revealing the richness

45 Love, 1987.

of user attitudes and suggesting the potential of on-line sales outlets as a source of user data in contemporary society. One, of course, should be conscious and wary of the limitations of this type of research but, admittedly, the product feedback recorded offers exciting insights to the researcher of material culture.

4. Conclusions through self-study

In order to complement my on-line research, I decided to make a self-study, involving the construction of the *Nanoblock Parthenon* set. So I bought the set box, which contains several plastic bags with numerous tiny pieces, plus a detailed instruction sheet offering step-by-step guidance (Fig. 3). Clearly, one has to be very careful that the tiny pieces will not fall on the floor and disappear, although the manufacturers kindly provide extra pieces, just to be on the safe side. The construction process occupied myself and my husband (in other words two middle-aged, educated adults) working collaboratively for one and a half hours. It was quite demanding, requiring a lot of concentration and patience; at the same time, it was very enjoyable. The pieces are well made and fit tightly to each other, while the guidance provided by the instruction sheet is very clear. The end-result is a satisfactory, quite precise and rather cute miniature replica of the monument (Fig. 4).⁴⁶ It is worth noting that the Nanoblock toys replicating monuments from all over the world are considered by Japanese to constitute an important part of their post-WWII cultural heritage.⁴⁷

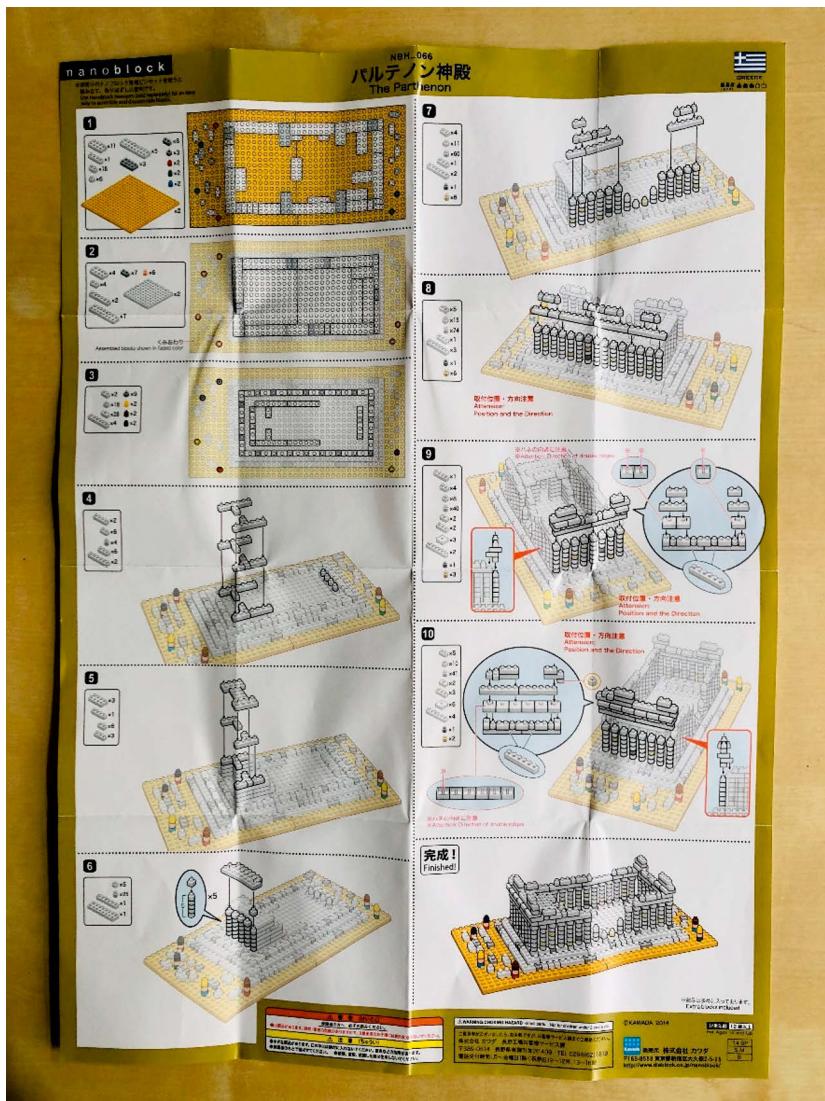
I would like to conclude by adding another personal dimension. I find it understandable that someone with a purist approach towards architecture and classical antiquity might shudder at the thought of these Parthenon-inspired toys and might view their oversimplifications and inaccuracies with horror. For someone like me (who was born, grew up and spent most of my life in Athens), the Parthenon is an everyday spectacle taken for granted when one moves in the city, but also a very potent symbol. For most Greeks, the image, idea and significance of the Parthenon represent a heavy ideological baggage, which has been casting an almost unbearable metaphorical shadow affecting the city, the whole country and the nation itself.⁴⁸ Researching toys replicating the Parthenon has been a fascinating endeavour for me and has motivated me to see the monument under a different light. Working on this essay has enabled me to go deeper into some aspects related to the construction and history of the Parthenon and learn a lot about it. Although I acknowledge the crude character of some of the toys examined, at the same time I

⁴⁶ For journalistic reports on Nanoblock see Williams, 2011, and Strietelmeier, 2013.

⁴⁷ I am grateful to historian Nobuhiro Yanagihara for this observation.

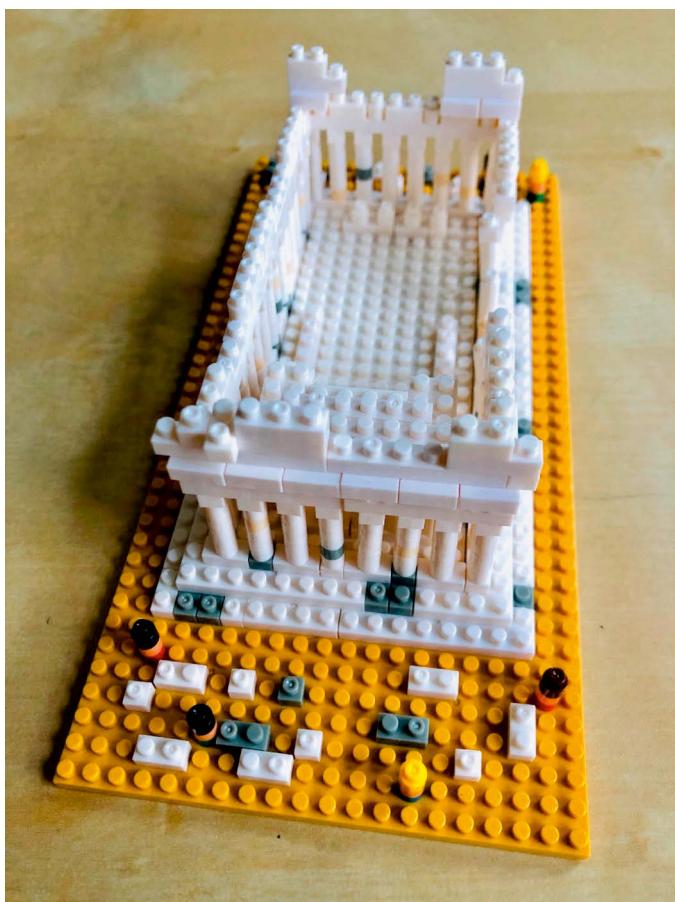
⁴⁸ Tziovas, 2014.

Figure 3: Instruction sheet of the Nanoblock Parthenon set



appreciate the creativity with which the monument is approached by manufacturers and users alike. Last but not least, when constructing the mini replica of the Parthenon, I had a lot of fun!

Figure 4: My self-built Nanoblock Parthenon



More generally, the mini Parthenons clearly illustrate the delicate balance between the educational value and presumed »seriousness« of toys versus their more playful or »frivolous« aspects.⁴⁹ Constructing ancient temples in miniature enables users to become more sensitive to the past and acquire some historical knowledge but, at the same time, the hedonistic aspect remains strong. The tension between work and fun which by definition underpins construction toys may not be brushed away. However, as some of the aforementioned quotes show, the users find individual, creative solutions to transform this tension in ways that make sense to

49 For a discussion of this polarity, see Sutton-Smith, 2001, 201-204.

them. The resulting experiences are complex and multidimensional; they may not be reduced to simplistic, one-sided descriptions. It would be limiting and unfair to judge history-inspired toys solely from the perspective of a passionate adult collector, a classics expert, or any other adult for that matter. Children tend to use the toy on their own terms, in order to have fun and reach their own personal goals, most of which remain a mystery, as the experience of the child is fundamentally elusive.⁵⁰ Ultimately, my overall evaluation of these historically-inspired construction sets is positive, as they apparently afford rich experiences to a range of users. In-depth research into the topic and systematic collection of further data would provide a fuller picture of the related play processes and their impact. The miniature temples are above all playful possibilities open to creativity, subversion and fun, and they should be treated as such.

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