

# PLAY

**Katya Tylevich delves into the world of toys for future architects.**

Text [Katya Tylevich](#)

# T I M E



Children are especially susceptible to brain-washing, which is why it's important to start talking to them about 'becoming an architect' now. Before they start 'forming opinions' of their own, you understand. In order to avoid seeming overly pushy and dictatorial (and having the neighbours call child-protection services), however, it is important for the parent or role model to approach the topic of 'becoming an architect' subtly – for example, by keeping only architecture-related toys in the home and by limiting all the child's activities to design, (good)

taste conditioning and thinly veiled lectures on the history of modern architecture. What follows is a survey of seven architecture- and design-related kits, toys and other items, which allow a legal guardian to steer his young flock towards a lifetime of innovation and potential client-architect conflict, while still maintaining the appearance of a democratic household, wherein children are encouraged to make their own decisions. Oh, you want to be a veterinarian, do you? Channel that free-spiritedness into the design, sweetheart. Pritzker Prizes don't win themselves.

Photos Markus D'Loughy



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**'One wrong interior-decorating decision can bastardize the architect's entire vision'**



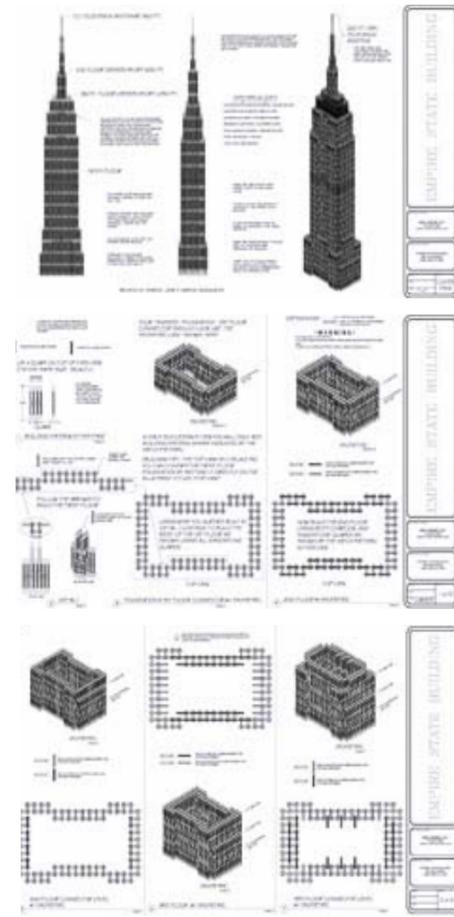
## Villa Sibis

Created by German interior designer Wolfgang Sirch and sculptor Christoph Bitzer, Villa Sibis is an antidote to the typical Mini-McMansion that crowds the housing market for your young one's toys and dolls. Vaguely Miesian, Villa Sibis is a clean geometric rectangle of waxed birch plywood that features sliding walls made of acrylic glass or wood lattice. Handsome enough to stand prominently on a living-room bookshelf, the Villa asks only for a small share of your property: depending on the parts you buy, the dimensions are roughly 73.5 cm (length) x 33.5 cm (width) x 25.5 cm (height). Perfectly curated minimalist interior furnishings and outdoor accoutrements for the Villa are sold separately. Don't kid yourself, though. Having come this far, you're going to spring for the designer beds and bench monoliths, the kitchenettes and showers, the covered pool. It's a valuable lesson to teach young children: one wrong decorating or remodelling decision can bastardize the architect's entire vision. Aw. That doesn't feel very good, does it? This is why it's important to spend money only on good design, princess. And if Villa Sibis serves as a small, visual reminder of the kind of house you always wanted but never had, so be it. It's high time your children inherited your feelings of regret and dissatisfaction, anyway. Studies show that emotional weight can be very motivating for architects.

The 'choking hazard' warning on this box set should come with the disclaimer: *\*By which we mean, children lacking patience and exceptional talent run the risk of choking on their own tears.* That is, if doing maths homework with your little one results in volcanic yelling matches and cries of 'I hate you', this kit might not fare well as a family bonding tool, either. It ain't easy. Parents, remember, this is an investment of almost US\$300 (even with current exchange rates, that's a lot of euros), so you might want to test-drive junior's endurance and *joie de* engineering with some basic Lego bricks first. Indeed, many reviews cite this self-described 'professional construction kit' as the next step following Lego. A next step taken with a big foot, I would say: the kit, intended for those ten years of age and older, consists of 3,200 pieces, 24 pages of full-scale authentic blueprints, and eight foundation plans, which allow its users to construct an existing or self-designed skyscraper, reaching some 2.4 m into the sky. Junior can even apply for a building permit online and learn the 'seismic and wind loads' for the proposed skyscraper. An interactive element allows young designers to locate one another's registered buildings on a world map. This is a product that uses the word 'load-bearing walls' in its advertising, not to mention 'an urban architect's dream building set'. So if your kid's into it, I wouldn't worry too much about saving up for that architecture education – this tyke's sure to get an academic scholarship. Added bonus: the clever use of 'normal looking' preteen boys in flip-flops for this product's marketing campaign further helps deceive little one into thinking architecture is a glamorous profession, which will compensate for years of getting beat up in middle school.

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## Überstix ÜberArc 3200 Piece Set



ÜberArc Architectural Series Empire State Building, 3,200 pieces.



Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House. Photos Brickstructures

## Lego Architecture Construction Sets



**'Most sets in this series are under US \$100 and result in a model small enough to stuff away in a closet'**

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Lego bricks have been long renowned as an effective means of coercing children into acts of construction and design, under the guise of 'play'. Now a collaboration between LEGO Group and self-titled 'Architectural Artist' Adam Reed Tucker of Brickstructures, Inc. takes the awkward 'What's with the pitched roof, honey? Build something a little more International Style next time' out of the experience. Your child will have no choice but to construct a building reminiscent of, say, a Mies van der Rohe when you buy him a Farnsworth House set – 546 Lego pieces that add up to only one thing: a discerning taste in modern architecture. Lego construction sets also introduce youngsters to Frank Lloyd Wright (Fallingwater, Guggenheim) and Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (Sears Tower, John Hancock Center), among others. They are a sensible alternative to ÜberArc, should the Überstix option prove uber difficult for the aspiring architect or uber expensive for those making the purchase. Most sets in this Lego series are under US\$100 and result in a model small enough to stuff away in a closet – should junior turn out to be a few spatial intuitions short of a Mies. For example, in its finished state Farnsworth clocks in as roughly 25 cm wide and 7 cm tall. When compared with other playthings popular with young people – television, for example – these construction sets are still in the 'rocket science' category but really quite manageable, with easy-to-follow instructions and booklets that detail aspects of design and architecture history in a palatable way. Maybe poppet will develop an interest in architecture history and end up writing about architecture for a living. That would be cute and just as financially unstable as designing buildings, wouldn't it?



## Architect Barbie

Finally, a toy that reinforces the importance of good looks in the field of architecture. High-heels, a pink blueprint holder and a pink scale model of a Dream House®: why, it's the spitting image of female architect and Modern Movement icon Eileen Gray. For more quips and snaps at the expense of Architect Barbie, please see: a lot of commentary on the internet. The actual doll *just* hit the market, but the library of debate, discussion and sarcasm about an Architect Barbie is more than a decade in the making. Part of Mattel's 'I can be...' series, which includes Barbie the Pizza Chef and Barbie the Dolphin Trainer, the new Architect Barbie was realized it seems by mandate of popular vote. As online rumour would have it, however, Architect Barbie has been a contender for some ten years and actually won the popular vote in 2001. Voter fraud! Discrimination! Two female members of the AIA even took it upon themselves to campaign (for years) for the creation of this Barbie. The back story proves as colourful as Architect Barbie's 'city skyline' print dress. Ergo, Architect Barbie does not have to be a literal role model for a child (though it's good she's got a hard hat); instead, this Barbie can be a vehicle for communicating the sociological resonance of architecture and the significance of female architects (and the lack thereof) past and present. Now parents can more easily broach the topic of Zaha Hadid with their children. Right? So it is that Architect Barbie comes equipped with historical and cultural baggage – why not put some of that weight on the shoulders of your innocent, naive, little blank slate? Again: studies show that emotional weight can be very motivating for architects.

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Photo [Mattel](#)

**'Architect Barbie helps parents to broach the topic of Zaha Hadid with their children more easily'**



The Kyoto Junior model.

Photos [SmartPlayhouse](#)

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## SmartPlayhouse Playhouses

The Illinois model.



It's never too soon to condition kids to live in stark, minimalist (and expensive) surroundings, so start while their brains are still soft and supple. A SmartPlayhouse designed especially for children by architect David Lamolla Kristiansen is the modern answer to, you know, *ugly* playhouses, which do nothing but propagate conservative architectural memes and, consequentially, the backwards, Victorian, puritanical ways of living in them. Or am I out of line here? There are currently four SmartPlayhouse models available for outdoor use and two for indoor use, from which I would suggest two designs. One is the Kyoto (indoor or outdoor), a white futuristic homage to avant-garde Japanese architecture, namely Toyo Ito's Mikimoto Building in Tokyo. The other, Illinois, is a clear tip of the hat to Mies van der Rohe (who would have guessed that Mies was so kid-friendly?) and, more concretely, to his Farnsworth House. SmartPlayhouses are weatherproof and kid-proof, but they do require assembly, so think hard about whether you really want to punch in as a DIY kind of parent, because this is a commitment that requires some light lifting *and* a screwdriver. Then again, you could always hire someone to assemble the playhouse for you: a good first step towards teaching your mites about what it's like to work with contractors. Make sure to micro-manage.

# Power House: Sustainable Living in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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Photo Thames & Kronos



Thames & Kosmos is a ten-year-old company dedicated to improving informal science education for children and, in the process, priming them for a lifetime of confrontation with right-wing conservatives through edifying kits with names like Global Warming and Sustainable Earth Lab. Tucked into the same category of products, titled Alternative Energy & Environmental Science, is Power House: Sustainable Living in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In so many words, the aim of this activity is for a child to build a model sustainable home complete with solar panels, windmill, greenhouse and more. On the website, company credo has it that they 'hope that building small models such as are provided in Power House will inspire you to plan and construct something on a larger scale'. The purpose is spelled out clearly: learning to boil water with solar energy today means spearheading the green architecture movement (and driving a Prius) tomorrow. Very apropos of current discussions and experiments

taking place on work sites today. The kit is intended for children aged 12 and up, though a gifted 11-year-old with a Ritalin prescription might be able to tackle the 96-page manual, 70 experiments and 20 building projects included in the box – along with a solar power station, a hygrometer and a wind-powered generator. Proposed activities centre on a fictional group of island dwellers that must live sustainably using only resources available on their small island. You want to make it as an architect in this hard world, junior? Then go desalinate some water. The Power House itself isn't a paragon of modern design – though it could be, if you just used your imagination, which is what childhood is all about. Still, the idea behind the kit is quite progressive and sophisticated. Not for parents who don't like their kids showing off and acting as if they're smarter than everybody else.

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*'The resulting home will feel warm, comfortable and mid-century modern'*

## Charles and Ray Eames House of Cards

Designed by architecture's favourite couple, Charles and Ray Eames, and first produced in 1952, this vintage feel-good, look-good activity consists of a deck of interlocking cards (available in different quantities and sizes online), which depict colourful patterns and pictures of 'familiar and nostalgic objects from the animal, vegetable or mineral kingdoms', as the Eames's are alleged to have said, while also referring to these images as 'the good stuff'. The objective of the game is to design your own house – of cards (get it?) – made of this 'good stuff'. No matter what shape it takes, therefore, the resulting home will feel warm and comfortable and healthy and mid-century modern and, despite itself, will be tinged with wistfulness for that intangible something that makes us think of opportunities come and gone, of experiments that never quite lived up to their hypotheses. Ostensibly an 'easy' game, the House of Cards might rest heavy on the sensitive heart. One might even accuse the youthful participant of 'not getting it' when what was supposed to be a fun evening activity eventually slouches into a night of sighs and too much liquid refreshment. I've got to say, though, the end result makes for great interior decoration.

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