
Amy F. Ogata’s Designing the Creative Child is an insightful investigation into the development and marketing of objects and spaces for children aimed at satisfying parental desires to promote creativity in the children of mid-century America. Ogata, professor at Bard Graduate Center, provides a well-organized tour through a wealth of evidence, ranging from toys to classrooms to junior museums. Her argument, that the emphasis on developing creativity in children was manifested and reinforced through multiple channels, is easily observed in the advertising, books, architectural designs, television programs, and companies that she presents as evidence. Beyond simply presenting these items as support for her argument, she contextualizes the national obsession for creative thinking that was called for as part of the response to the insecurities of the Atomic Age and rooted in theories about child development.

Readers in art and design history will be interested in her analysis of toys created by notable figures such as Charles and Ray Eames and institutions like the Walker Art Center. The role of museums in facilitating and encouraging toy development is outlined through events such as the 1953 Play Sculpture competition, which was a joint venture of MoMA, Parents’ Magazine, and Creative Playthings, and the deliberate construction of spaces like the Brooklyn Children’s Museum. Ogata’s investigation into classroom design encompasses school buildings as well as the trends in furniture design that were centered on creating learning spaces to foster creativity.

Ogata’s in-depth research provides many useful case studies for future investigation, such as whether or not educational toys truly provide a platform for developing creativity or if they primarily reflect the desire for the development of that skill. The extensive bibliography will also support further investigation into the material culture of childhood. This monograph, which includes a significant number of illustrations, will be particularly useful for collections supporting design history as well as museum studies.

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